# *Life AFTER Death – Choices and Consequences*

**HINT: The key to heaven is love!**

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to Fr. James E. Royce, S.J. (RIP), a friend and professor of philosophy and psychology at Seattle University in the early 1960's. He was a chaperone for our hiking club and we had a very enjoyable relationship for several years. I also took his class on the Philosophy of Man which may well have laid the foundation for my studies for this book. Maybe he's still teaching me.

I have Fr. Royce's book, *Man and his Nature; a Philosophical Psychology*, but haven't studied it yet – another lengthy project which may affect some of my thinking expressed in this book. I look forward to that study. Thank you, Fr. Royce, for being in my life.

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## Prologue

Everyone needs to understand the connection between their choices and resulting consequences, both good and bad. They need to know that there is ultimate justice in those consequences. That level of justice does not and cannot occur in this life, but after death in heaven or hell. They need to understand the implications of God and heaven, Satan and hell, and purgatory in between. They need to know these things in order to form a good conscience and make better choices for their own sake and for everyone they impact.

I would love for everyone to read and enjoy this book but understand that's not likely – it's not so exciting that you can't put it down. It's perhaps boring or not appealing to many but it contains a lot of thought-provoking ideas about life and death, life after death, choices and consequences. There's a lot of stuff in here to digest. I suggest the reader take it a bit at a time, read a few chapters and then take some time off to think about it. What do you get from it? What do you agree or disagree with? Or do you even care?

Please let me know if you read it all the way through and what you think about it. Email me at ljsouthwick@outlook.com.

Thank you,
Larry Southwick

The old saying goes: 'nothing is certain except death and taxes.' This book is a series of essays about the certainty of death and what it's like after death. Moreso, why we should be concerned about it, i.e., **consequences**, and what we can do about it – **choices**.

But life and death must be understood in context of a much larger picture, so bear with me to paint that larger picture. I'll try to be brief about each component, but I've written more extensively about some of the elements in other essays. I've studied this whole picture in a lot of detail and will include references where you can see or read more about some parts. (see Bibliography)

The first and most important part of the picture is that God really exists in a spiritual nature in conjunction with our natural world and that God wants us to join him in the fullness of that spiritual nature in heaven after our death. But he has given us free will to choose that outcome or not.

Similarly, Satan also really exists in a spiritual nature, and he will do everything he can to prevent you from the completion of your journey to God. But again, you have the free choice to seek God or to follow Satan, hence choices and consequences.

And because God and Satan exist in a spiritual nature, they can and do influence what happens in our own spiritual lives, but for the most part, their work is carried out in our physical world by people – you and me. Everyone, through their own choices and actions in many ways, can and do work for God or Satan.

For example, I pray for guidance (spiritual), support, care and protection for myself and my loved ones. Most of the support, care and protection is provided (by God) through people just doing their normal everyday lives. So, if we are aware of that, we should also pray and be thankful to all those who provide for us, support us, care for us and protect us.

Directly related to that understanding is that God sees us through the eyes of other people in how we treat them, relate to them and even how we think about them. Similar to our childhood understanding of Santa Claus, God *"sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake, he knows when you've been bad or good, so be good, for goodness' sake."*

Life is a continuous education of learning, experiences, choices and consequences. Each person accumulates a grade point average based on their performance throughout their life. And death locks in that grade for final judgment and determination of eternal destiny.

The purpose of this book is to help you, the reader, to understand what life after death really means so you may, with God's help, make the right choices to achieve eternal life in heaven, and avoid the harsh, opposite outcome in hell.

In order to set the stage, I'd like you to first look up and read a couple things on your phone or tablet or computer. To see more about life immediately after death, look up 'near-death experiences' (NDE), particularly Near-Death Experience Research

Foundation, (nderf.org). *"There are over 5,000 Experiences from all over the world and translated into many languages."* These are documented 'experiences' of people who have actually died and were subsequently revived to tell what that death experience was like. Jeffrey Long, M.D. founded the NDERF and wrote in his book, *Evidence of the Afterlife*, about nine 'proofs' that **life after death is a reality, *"beyond a reasonable doubt."***

A very compelling account of a near-death experience, including a very descriptive chapter of actually being in God's presence, is in Mickey Robinson's book, *Falling Into Heaven*. He was a competitive skydiver and was literally burned to death in a plane crash. He survived and in Chapter 13, he beautifully describes his experience in the very real presence of God (see **Heaven** below). There is also a YouTube interview with Mickey where you can see a short version of his experience: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qM9Zs-erD8.

There are more videos in that section of YouTube that might be helpful for your understanding of near-death experiences. They may get a little 'preachy' because they literally have 'seen the light.'

Another book with an extensive description about NDE is *Proof of Heaven* by Dr. Eben Alexander. He was in a coma for a week and wrote about his extended experience with God. See ***Proof of Heaven*** below for a more complete description about that book.

Another very good resource about NDE is the video *After Death* by Angel Studios. It's a documentary of interviews with a number of people who had near-death experiences themselves as well as comments by doctors and others who have researched NDE, including Dr. Long mentioned above. Again, see ***After Death*** below for a discussion about that video.

Then, look up 'Maria Simma,' an Austrian woman, 1915-2004, who experienced visits by souls in purgatory from 1940 until her death, over 60 years. There are a number of references online but, if you're interested in more detail, read ***Get Us Out Of Here!!*** by Nicky Eltz (see below) who interviewed Maria over three years for the book. Maria's direct experience with those souls helps fill in a lot of detail about life after death, particularly purgatory where most of us will likely take the next steps in our journey after death. More about that later.

Much of this writing is based on my Catholic faith and the teachings of the Church (when I use this word, I mean Catholic Church). But I also have a number of differences with those teachings, so I'll try to give you the explicit teaching and why/how I differ from it. Then you can evaluate it for yourself. I wouldn't have gotten to this understanding without first having experienced and studied the Church's teaching and my faith in more depth.

This book is only a part of my studies and writing which has developed over the last 25+ years. I published a book in 2016, *A Window Into My Soul*, a collection of around 100 essays that I'd written up to that time and include a few later in this book. I've

continued to study and write; this effort is still an on-going stage, and I have several more books yet to study and evaluate. More context comes literally every day from the internet and media that may steer me to other issues and evaluations. Some of this content was inspired by articles I've read and studied online. (see Bibliography)

You might say I'm an unofficial graduate student of philosophy and theology. I'm studying, evaluating and writing my conclusions to add to my own knowledge base. I hope that it helps you, the reader, in forming your own knowledge of God and what our life after death really means.

## Truth

My goal is to understand and express this 'picture' of life and death as truthfully as possible. There are two kinds of truth – objective and subjective. **Objective truth** is consistent with and understood in reality, e.g., scientific facts and laws; it is not subject to individual interpretation. **Subjective truth** is based on individual interpretations of what they see and experience, e.g., religion and politics. Objective truth is universal; subjective truth is individual and the result of a human choice. To the extent possible, my 'choice' is objective truth when/wherever possible.

In his book, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Yuval Noah Harari adds an interesting third perspective – **'intersubjective truth'** which is based on what many people believe to be true but may or may not be based on reality. He concludes that some of our most fundamental beliefs in today's cultures are based on myths, not reality, but many people, perhaps most, believe them to be true anyway, religion being one of them (his opinion).

I can say, 'let the facts show us the truth,' but I also see every day that the exact same 'facts' are seen by everyone, but people come to entirely opposite conclusions anyway, e.g., January 6, 2021. So even the most objective facts can lead to subjective understanding (or misunderstanding). My hope and purpose is to show the facts as best I can and let you, the reader, come to your own conclusions, even while I express my own understanding of what the facts show us.

Another way to look at 'facts' is as evidence. To reach a truthful decision, one should look at all the evidence and be open to where it leads. It seems many are not really open to that. They have their own perspective and are resistant to evidence that takes away from or is contradictory to their position. And their evidence may be from sources that are biased toward their perspective. That results in their decisions being pre-determined and subjective.

My intent is to present a lot of solid evidence from many sources about God, the spiritual world and life after death. I hope that you, the reader, are open-minded to reasonably look at the evidence. And, as Dr. Sabom says in ***After Death*** (documentary video, see below), *"when there is a lot of evidence, most people will agree that it's real."*

Honest searching for truth requires discernment – a process of learning all about the subject, considering alternatives, weighing them against morals and standards, etc. but then it becomes subjective – making a choice. And that choice is shaped by our own background, our culture, how we were raised, experiences we've had, things that have influenced us. The most important consideration is moral – does it follow God's law of love; does it do good or harm? See the sections below about moral laws and how God judges.

One of the most certain sources of truth is nature itself throughout the cosmos and life here on earth. God has revealed himself first through his creation – what he intended and how it all works. We can know much of the truth about God just through observation of nature. **Nature can only tell the truth**. I'll expand on that idea later but it's a key to understanding life and death.

Most of what we believe in faith of any kind is literally intersubjective, i.e., believed by many but may or may not necessarily be based on objective reality. That presents a challenge to all religions – how to explain and understand concepts of God and the spiritual world when it's not physically present, i.e., objectively. It's real but we can't see or hear or touch it directly. We have to see it through our mental senses, not our physical senses, and then we have to evaluate and understand it with our intellect and will. That makes it subjective individually or intersubjective collectively.

Our societies run on many intersubjective truths; we accept them as normal without question. But it seems in these times and today's issues that, for many people, what they believe to be true is more important than the objective truth. 'Don't confuse me with the facts, I've already made up my mind.' Few seem willing to be open to the truth if it contradicts what they already believe.

The proper word for that is **'delusion'**: ***A delusion is a false fixed belief that is not amenable to change in light of conflicting evidence.*** *As a pathology, it is distinct from a belief based on false or incomplete information, confabulation…* (Wikipedia, my emphasis) That makes the distinction between intractable false beliefs of people who act upon them and those just believing something that is not true which happens to everyone at some point.

For another example in today's real world, see *We're watching mass delusion happen* in The Guardian, January 26, 2025. (see Bibliography for link)

In Matthew 7:15-20, Jesus says: *"Beware of false prophets --- by their fruits you will know them."* Who are the false prophets; where does delusion come from? By their fruits you will know them. Truth comes from God; lies and deceit come from Satan – it's that simple.

Today's world is filled with false prophets, their lies and deceit. Again, how will you recognize them – by their fruits. If their message is about love, respect, compassion, support, etc., it's from God; if it's about hate, violence, discrimination, etc., it's from Satan.

We see that throughout history and it's very much evident around the world today, in the news and media, in politics and in our Church. False fixed beliefs that are intractable in the face of objective truths. We are all equally capable of being deluded, on both sides of our divisions. And some of it, regardless of our best intentions, can be directly attributed to Satan's work among us. Satan's most powerful tool is delusion. More about that a bit later.

What's even more troubling to me is that around half of our nation literally believes in lies, fabrication and misinformation. Consider the ninth commandment which says, *"You shall not bear false witness against you neighbor."* Exodus 20.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) 392, when speaking about the fallen angels says: ***The devil has sinned from the beginning; he is a liar and the father of lies***. CCC 2475-2487 speaks in detail about *Offenses Against Truth. A lie consists of speaking a falsehood with the intention of deceiving. --- Lying is the most direct offense against the truth. --- By its very nature, lying is to be condemned. --- Since it violates the virtue of truthfulness, a lie does real violence to another. ---* ***Lying is destructive of society; it undermines trust among men and tears apart the fabric of social relationships***. (my emphasis, see chapter on **Satan**)

Honesty and truthfulness are virtues; lying in all forms are vices. (see **Natural moral laws** below) Lying is not just about an opinion or free speech; it's honesty vs. dishonesty, virtue vs. vice. Right reason respects the truth and rejects dishonesty. But our world is not heaven, and I suspect lies have been a major part of our history as humans because we may not like the truth and lies better fit our desires. And we're free to choose our desires over the truth. That's the real world we live in.

Worse yet, many of the lies, fabrications and misinformation are doing great and unjust harm to many innocent people. They lead to hate, discrimination and injustice. Why? Just to divide our nation and to gain power for themselves. By their fruits, you will know them.

That's the basis for most of our ideological divisions – conservative or liberal, etc. Each side firmly believes that it has the real truth and cannot or will not accept that the other position may be true. That's the nature of subjective truth – everyone has the legitimate right to believe what they choose, even if it's not objectively true. What's unfortunate (and in my opinion, seriously wrong) is that each side wants to force the other side into submission to accept their version rather than tolerate a difference of opinion. We see that vividly in Christian nationalism as well as some of the Church's positions regarding abortion and LGBTQ issues. For example, don't allow President Biden or others to choose a position different than the Church's rules, or even punish them somehow to force them to change their minds.

It also seems that some in the Church are more insistent on maintaining traditional beliefs even if they may not be objectively true. We've learned a great deal in the last 2000+ years, yet many seem unwaveringly committed to practices and policies from

Christ's time and before, i.e., in the Bible, that no longer seem truthful. In fact, as I'll describe later in **Whose rules does God judge by?**, the traditional Church itself has been the source of wars and cause of a great amount of human suffering based on what we now see as errors in ideology.

There's a reason for that. The Church is a theocracy, formed by the Son of God, and led over 2000 years by his ordained ministers, bishops and popes. And the Church claims that God has given it infallibility when it comes to matters of faith and moral teaching. That should make its claim to truth unassailable, i.e., going up against the Word of God. It would be much easier if that were 100% true, but fortunately or unfortunately, the Church is still led by fallible human beings who have shown throughout history to make significant errors in policies, e.g., recent acknowledgment about the fifteenth century **Discovery Doctrine**. (I've written in more detail about that in other essays and more about it later below in **Whose rules does God judge by?**)

But the unfortunate side of that Church philosophy is the sense of literal infallibility, i.e., 'we cannot make a mistake; we're right and you're wrong.' And not just by Catholics but also Protestant Christians and others. That has been shown throughout history, and I saw the same on the daily internet news while I was writing this. It gives the person with that faith in themselves a reason to discriminate against others as well as to try to impose their beliefs and standards on others, both personally and throughout society, e.g., Christian nationalism. Just look at today's politics and you'll see it repeatedly.

I recently read an article that basically said, 'mixing faith and politics is both bad religion and bad law.' That seems very appropriate for our current political environment.

I take my Catholic faith very seriously and don't take it lightly to challenge it, but you'll see some of my concerns in this book. I used to be very conservative but am now more liberal and willing to take up the challenge to some of the Church's teachings. But my intent here is not to just express my personal 'subjective' understanding of my faith but to look at it critically and objectively.

So, is everything in this book 'true'? Of course not! Most of it is subjective; my own interpretation of the evidence I've studied. It's as true as I can make it today with my current knowledge. Many others know more about some of these things than I do. You are free to agree or disagree and add your own knowledge for the common good.

And new knowledge is published every day. Numerous times as I wrote this book, I've added new material from other sources or articles that I read that add to my own knowledge base. Frequently I see new articles about life, death, how our brain works, etc., that may make yesterday's knowledge out of date. I'm open to new knowledge as it comes. Part of the problem now in our Church and society in general is that people (many) are closed to new knowledge and so they are still basing much of their faith on things that were written thousands of years ago and some of it even before writing itself. My hope is that my readers are also open to new knowledge.

In the book, *Wayfarers in the Cosmos: the Human Quest for Meaning*, the author, George V. Coyne, S.J., quotes St. Augustine regarding truth:

> *Truth! Truth! How the very marrow of my soul within me yearned for it as they dinned it into my ears over and over again! To them it was no more than a name to be voiced or a word to be read in their libraries of huge books. But while my hunger was for you, for Truth itself, these were the dishes on which they served me up the sun and the moon, beautiful works of yours but still only your works, not you yourself.*

CAUTION: if it turns out after death that I'm wrong and the conservative teachings are literally true, many more people may be in danger of failing the test of life. That's a choice you, the reader, will have to make for yourself.

## Knowledge, revelation and inspiration

**God is knowledge**. No knowledge exists outside of God; he is the only source of knowledge. All our current knowledge existed in God first and was somehow revealed to us by God throughout history over thousands of years and through many, many different people. (my opinion)

We have knowledge of the universe, the earth and, to the extent of our current limitations, about everything on earth including life, through our physical senses and intellectual reason. We have knowledge of God and the spiritual universe but not through our physical senses because we can't see or touch it.

We can each gain new knowledge throughout our lives but much of it is just rehashing what we've already learned. We begin learning immediately after birth through our senses – sights, sounds, smells, from our parents and those around us. We learn from our families, friends, teachers and others we have contact with. We learn directly from our experiences. We process what we learn, store it in our memory and then continue to build on that knowledge base. And we add to it by using our intellect and reasoning to better understand what we've learned and then further extrapolate it to new levels.

St. Thomas said in *Summa Theologica* that we can know a great deal about God through our intellectual reasoning, but we must also rely on **God's own 'revelation'** to know God more fully.

It's the later, knowledge of God, that is typically referred to as 'revelation,' which God himself has 'revealed' to the prophets and saints, and especially through Jesus Christ himself, then through his Church (Catholic). The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) glossary describes **revelation** as: *God's communication of himself, by which he makes known the mystery of his divine plan, a gift of self-communication which is realized by deeds and words over time, and most fully by sending us his own divine Son, Jesus Christ.*

CCC 50-100 describes the Church's teaching regarding revelation, all exclusively through the Biblical (Jewish) prophets and then through Jesus Christ, the Word of God. *God has said everything in his Word.* ***There will be no further revelation****. One common source* (of revelation) – *Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition bound together. The heritage of faith* (in God, et al) ***entrusted to the whole of the Church and the Magisterium of the Church…alone****. This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the bishop of Rome* (the Pope). (my emphasis, and again see above re: Church's infallibility)

*Growth in understanding the faith: Thanks to the assistance of the Holy Spirit, the understanding of both the realities and the words of the heritage of faith is able to grow … through the contemplation and study of believers* (theologians) *… from the intimate sense of spiritual realities which believers experience …* (and) *from the preaching of those who have received, along with their right of succession in the episcopate* (priests), ***the charism of truth***.

That limits the use of the term 'revelation' to historical Church tradition and teaching; by that definition, all other forms of knowledge about God are not through revelation. But that knowledge is still open to further interpretation and understanding, but again only through the Church's Magisterium – not you or me or anyone else. Further, the Bible was entirely written by selected individuals under the explicit revelation by God.

Yet the Church has always taught that the Holy Spirit is constantly at work within the Church, through its Magisterium, through the many councils, through the Popes and consecrated priests (including bishops and cardinals). Pope Francis instructed the recent Synod members to listen to the Holy Spirit. Catholics and many other religions invoke the Holy Spirit to get involved directly in their ministry.

We know immensely more about God now than we did two thousand years ago but that is apparently not attributed to God's revelation. Isn't the Holy Spirit's good work 'revelation'? If not, then, what is it? Is it just through man's own intelligence and reasoning? That would make all that knowledge less reliable than some parts of the Bible that were 'inspired' by God yet are not objectively truthful.

God created man with a soul which includes the gifts of intellect and reason. We can not only learn a great deal of existing knowledge through teaching and other resources, but we can also use the power of reason to advance knowledge beyond current resources. That's what St. Thomas was referring to. We can expand our knowledge of God through observation and intellectual reasoning through our experiencing nature and the reality around us.

**It's my premise that all the sciences are, in fact, theology, the study of God's creation** – the universe and everything in it. They tell us how God works which is a revelation of God's plan for the universe and us humans. Yes, we need the Church's version of revelation but that, by itself, is incomplete knowledge of God. But according

to the Church, none of that additional knowledge of God can be attributed to God's own revelation; it's apparently just through human origins.

Further, I believe that God himself (or through his angels) has revealed all knowledge, yes some through the above, but also through billions of small pieces of knowledge throughout the history of mankind, similar to evolution itself, one idea after another, building on prior knowledge. Every new idea that results in intellectual knowledge (not just imagination) is a bit of new revelation – God sharing his knowledge with us. Essentially, all our current knowledge from all sources around the world in all languages and cultures, was originally revealed by God at some time in the past to someone (or more) who recorded it somehow and added it to the common base of knowledge we take for granted today.

But every day, God is continuing to reveal new knowledge about creation of the universe to scientists, e.g., through the new space telescopes and technologies. Likewise, medical researchers are finding new treatments and medicines that help us understand (knowledge) how life itself works, down to the DNA level and smaller. Other scientists are finding new evidence (and knowledge) of the earliest days of life and humanity on earth. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Knowledge of God and how he works is a constant, continuing result of new revelation by God (in my opinion).

Maybe, the term for the source of all that new knowledge is more properly called **inspiration,** not revelation**. Inspiration**: *the process of being mentally stimulated to do or feel something, especially to do something creative. Synonyms: inventiveness, innovation, ingenuity*. (internet definition, all of which are human qualities given to us by God)

Inspired writing in the Bible is considered 'revelation' whether it's objectively true or not, yet inspiration after the Bible is not considered revelation even when we know it's true. Maybe it's just semantics or tradition but it doesn't make sense.

Inspiration starts in our subconscious mind, either on its own initiative or through suggestion or input from other spiritual beings – God, angels (good or bad) – and then we process that inspired thought in our conscious mind. Inspiration also comes from other 'inspirational' people, e.g., parents, teachers, coaches, mentors, leaders, etc. It can also come from something you've read or seen or experienced. It's not necessarily all from spiritual beings but it's spiritual in nature, i.e., it's not material until we act upon it.

Inspiration is how we learn things that we don't acquire from other sources but from within ourselves. It's not necessarily new knowledge that might have been established anytime, elsewhere, but it's new to us and we learned it intuitively rather than physically, i.e., reading, seeing, hearing.

Authors, poets, artists, musicians, architects, engineers, scientists, etc., all 'create' new work and knowledge, first through inspiration, the point of beginning being an idea, and then processed in their consciousness to bring it to life. Inspiration is the primary,

original source of most human knowledge and is the basis for inventions and solutions of all kinds.

Inspiration is the primary way that God communicates with us. God has inspired humanity throughout its history, not only in the Bible. Inspiration is a gift from God to our soul along with our intellect, reason and free will. Inspiration is how we work with and for God. It makes God a part of our work.

But to say that our inspiration is only from our own initiative and intelligence is egotistical and takes away credit where it's due – to God, the source of all knowledge. Maybe those who believe that mankind has the ability and intelligence to develop new knowledge without God's help are following Lucifer's original sin of pride. I'm so intelligent that I can do this on my own; I don't need God's help.

The problem is that divine inspiration is then processed through the human brain which is not perfect and comes with its own bias, limitation and error. That may be why the Bible falls short of truth in some areas – human misunderstanding, not God's misdirection.

Also, inspiration can also come from evil sources and result in very bad outcomes – war, violence, abuse, neglect, etc. We are all subject to some negative inspiration – it's called temptation, whether it comes from spiritual beings, from other people or from material we see. We condition ourselves through our choices and habits to be more open to good or bad inspiration. Our challenge is to nurture good inspiration and build up our defense against temptation.

Much of this book is written by starting with inspiration, just a thought or idea popping up. I write it down and then expand on it while writing with new inspiration, fleshing out the idea. I also must give credit to the many people that I've learned from over 75 years of active participation in my Catholic faith. And, as you'll see, I'm continuing to add new understanding as I write. I'll give credit to those resources wherever I use them.

So, how do we know when/if inspiration is true? By checking it with objective reality, i.e., **Truth**, as discussed above.

### Pray for our deceased loved one's

Throughout this whole exercise of understanding the concepts of life after death, always remember that every human being that has ever lived is still alive in a spiritual nature and that our love and prayers for them are important. All our deceased loved ones benefit from our love and prayers right now regardless of how long ago they passed away or how well they lived their lives. We may make assumptions about their status, e.g., in heaven, but we just don't know, so we must always keep them in our love and prayers. No love or prayer for them is in vain and may indeed be quite beneficial for their sake. And be assured that their love is reciprocal for us too.

Prayer is itself a gift from God via our thoughts for our loved ones. God gives us the opportunity to provide his gift to them along with our own love and support. Just keeping our deceased loved ones in our thoughts is good but it's supplemented with God's gift when we pray for his love on their behalf. As you will see further on in this book, that gift of prayer is important for our loved ones' journey to heaven.

**God**

The big picture has to start with God – the intelligence, power and will of all creation. If you don't believe in God, the rest of this picture still exists (objectively true) but you won't be able to understand it without placing it in the context of God. If you believe in God, then you already have some context for the rest of the picture.

Looking back to my college classes in philosophy, I recall the premise of cause and effect: i.e., for every effect or outcome, there has to be a sufficient cause. Nothing happens without some sort of cause and the sufficient cause must be capable of bringing about the effect, whatever that may be.

Because the cosmos and everything in it (including ourselves) really does exist, there must, by definition, have been and still present a cause with the capability to create it. Given the immensity of the cosmos – all galaxies and black holes and other phenomena in the vastness of space – that cause has to be extraordinarily powerful, intelligent and complex.

Further, that ultimate cause of all creation has to be eternal, that is, not having a beginning or end, because if not, that would itself require a greater, previous cause by something else.

That extraordinary, powerful, knowledgeable and loving cause is God. There can be no other such cause or source of the existence of the universe. Further, we can learn and know a lot about God, the cause, by studying the effects – creation, natural laws, natural processes, e.g., life and death.

As Christians, we know of God as three persons in one, unified being – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) describes this trinity as: *The revealed truth of the Holy Trinity is at the very root of the Church's living faith as expressed in the Creed. The mystery of the Trinity in itself is inaccessible to the human mind and is the object of faith only because it was revealed by Jesus Christ, the divine Son of the eternal Father.* (CCC Glossary)

The Old Testament of the Bible describes the relationship between God and the *'chosen people'* of Israel. God mostly spoke to his people through many different prophets throughout that period but was only seen through various natural forms – fire, wind, dove, etc., not as a 'person.'

From the New Testament, we know that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, took on a human body and life, was born of the Virgin Mother Mary, and grew up as the son of Mary and Joseph. At the age of thirty, he began his three-year public ministry of teaching

his followers, curing the sick, raising the dead, and performing many other miracles to demonstrate the reality of his loving and supernatural being. He was tortured, crucified, died, buried, and rose from the dead on what we now celebrate as Easter, his resurrection. He sent the Holy Spirit to the apostles on Pentecost, who then subsequently conferred the Holy Spirit on their followers, and so on down through the ages to our present time.

Because Jesus repeatedly spoke of God as his 'Father,' that's the image that comes to our minds – an older, grandfather figure. We think of God as a 'person,' similar to our human form. As such, he would be limited and singular in a given place, i.e., heaven. But God the Father and Spirit don't have bodies as we think of and are not limited by space or time. God is a universal spiritual being, everywhere, at all times. But just because God is everywhere, at all times, doesn't necessarily mean that he is acting or directing all things, although he could and probably does in many ways that we don't see or comprehend. (See **Consciousness** below for more discussion about this aspect of God)

All other beings, including humans, are singular in body and spirit and can only be in one place at a time. The exception to that natural law is that some chosen people, by God's will, may be given the ability of bilocation, i.e., to be able to be in two places at the same time. Padre Pio is a particular example of that gift of God:

*Bilocation is the simultaneous presence of the same person in two different places. Through the supernatural gift of bilocation, Padre Pio was able to be in different places at the same time. He was able to be present and speak, listen, and live in two or more different events all at once.* (www.padrepiodapietrelcina.com/en/padre-pio-the-bilocation/)

God created broad natural laws to guide and manage creation and leaves most things that happen under the control of those natural laws. He also gave humans free will and doesn't cause or prevent us from exercising that free will. Otherwise, it wouldn't be 'free' but limited, guided or caused. See later for more discussion about those ideas.

The *Catechism* has a very detailed and specific understanding of God which I believe, but I also believe in a more complex God, a more universal God. The Church is very 'Christian' in nature, centered on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The Church seems to have an exclusive viewpoint of God in the Christian framework and seems to exclude the possibility that God could also exist within other historical and traditional faiths – Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, etc. I'll discuss that too in more detail later.

Some who don't believe in that kind of God, believe that nature itself is the real source of creation and life. Some believe that nature itself is eternal in order to avoid having to explain how it came to be. I'll discuss nature and creation in more detail later, but my premise is that nature is, in fact, created by God as the framework for the entire cosmos and everything in it, including life on earth. All nature exists within and because

of God. Nature also shows us a lot about the nature of God himself, and nature can only tell the truth.

God is real and is the supreme power over all creation. God is supernatural, larger and more powerful than all the natural powers of the cosmos. God is spiritual in nature and exists within a spiritual world which co-exists with the physical universe. God is eternal; no beginning and no end, always was and always will be. God is supremely intelligent and the source of our own limited intelligence.

In his book, *Falling Into Heaven*, Mickey Robinson describes being in the presence of God in his near-death experience. See a limited version of that description in a later chapter on **Heaven**. He wrote a whole chapter on that experience and it's worth getting the book just for that chapter.

But most of all, God is love. All of creation exists because God willed it out of his love. Human beings (and angels) are the only part of creation that truly share in God's love and spiritual nature. I believe and have written in other essays that our own love is the distance we are from God; the more love we have in our own life for God and others, the closer we are to God; and vice versa.

While God is all-powerful and loving, it's my thinking that Christianity teaches an unrealistic reliance on God's intervention in our lives. Yes, he could, but God doesn't work that way. That's because God's over-riding gift of free will allows many good and bad things to happen to us without his interference. If God did interfere, he would be taking control of free will, choosing winners and losers. He lets things happen according to natural laws (see below) and lets us make our own choices. He allows some very bad people to do very bad things but doesn't interfere in their free will.

Over reliance on God's intervention can lead to unrealistic expectations and that can lead to loss of faith in God – he didn't answer our prayers; he let bad things happen. The current (2025) political turmoil in our country even caused me to wonder why God let it happen. How can a loving and merciful God allow all the pain and suffering we see every day in the news. Why doesn't God intervein and make it all better? Or prevent such bad things from happening? Wars? Disasters? Famine? Accidents? God allows those things to happen but neither causes them nor prevents them. Yes indeed, pray for God's intervention, his love and care for those suffering, but don't have an unrealistic expectation of his response. He doesn't work that way.

## Angels

We believe that God created angels in a spiritual nature like his own before he created the physical world. He desired to have other living beings to share in his love and creation. God gave angels intellect and free will in order to know and express their own love. If they didn't have free will, they would be more like puppets and could only do what he wanted them to do. What's true for the angels is also true for us human beings. (see **My theory of creation** for more discussion)

An interesting philosophical question is, how are we humans like angels? Are they models for our human souls? Are they 'born' fully developed or do they have a natural developmental process similar to our life cycle from birth to maturity? It seems that their lives and development may be similar to our human experience. Or more likely, human development may mirror that of the angels.

As I wrote this, I studied an online educational series produced by Good Catholic entitled: *Angels & the Supernatural*. A few concepts to share:

*All angels are male*. I don't yet understand why that makes a difference because there wouldn't seem to be any reason for having two sexual identities anyway because they don't self-reproduce; they are/were created wholly by God. If there is only one identity, why is it male? They are pure spirits and were created long before sexual identity even existed. They don't have bodies so why the distinction, other than to establish or enhance the masculinity of it all? God the Father, God the Son, only male angels – no wonder the Church is male-dominant. My sense is that angels are *'agender'* – neither male nor female nor any third gender. (Wikipedia) Or maybe gender-free would be a better description.

*There are vast numbers of angels in a nine-level hierarchy, all under God's guidance and will.* Angels are a much greater part of God's overall plan than we comprehend in our physical world, perhaps even more involved in events throughout history and our day-to-day lives. Maybe they are involved in what we see as nature and natural laws, how natural things work?

The top three levels are very close to God. They are perfect reflections of God. The middle three levels, according to the Church, govern the cosmos, have power over the material creation, and protect the natural laws of God's creation. The lower three levels are the interface between God and mankind. All levels know, love and serve God directly and only do as he wills, carrying out his direction in all things.

That implies that God works through his angels in many ways that affect our humanity, implementing God's plans and directions on our behalf. So, in general, from here on in this book, when I write of God's actions in natural laws and creation or other areas, that could well be the angels carrying out those directions from God himself, rather than everything being done by God's own, direct intervention. It makes sense that, if God created a vast resource of loving, intelligent and powerful beings, i.e., angels, that he would use them to the greatest extent possible, making them a necessary part of the processes.

Much of what we know about angels is through a number of accounts in the Bible (revelation) and through direct experience by a number of saints. Because we have little objective evidence otherwise, our understanding and belief in angels is largely a matter of intersubjective faith.

I have more questions about angels than answers. I need a better understanding about how angels interact with humans and the things around us. What effect do they

really have on it all? Probably a lot more than we'll ever know in this life; something to look forward to after death.

**Satan**

We believe that Lucifer was one of the most intelligent and powerful angels who was envious of God and chose, by his own free will (that itself a gift from God), to oppose God out of selfishness and pride. For his rebellion, he and his followers were banished from God's presence to eternal hell. Hell existed before creation of the universe and was already present in the world when God created humankind, allowing us to choose between God and Satan, the very origin of sin itself.

A key difference between God and Satan is that God created everything and has unlimited power; Satan did not and cannot 'create' anything. Satan is an evil angel, and his primary power is strong influence which can and does cause great harm to and through his followers. But Satan cannot make us do anything; we have the power of free will to choose to follow God or Satan, contrary to what Flip Wilson (comedian) used to say, "*the devil made me do it."* But Satan is very powerful so it's not easy, and we need God's help to resist Satan.

As I was praying to St. Micheal, the Archangel, per our Catholic tradition, *'to conquer Satan and all the evil spirits,'* I was attributing all the evil in the world today to Satan as the primary responsible being. Then I realized that every single human being (or angel) with an intellect and free will can equally choose to be truly evil, just as Satan did. Satan may help those so inclined but, again, he can't make them evil; they may choose it and are fully responsible for it themselves. The devil didn't make them do it.

We are all sinners, partly because of our human nature (see **Natural moral laws** below) but also because of the influence of Satan in our lives. If we accept the validity and truth of God, we must also accept the reality of Satan and his effects in the real world. We see that every day in the evil that invades our world, our lives and even our own thoughts and deeds. The very existence of Satan jeopardizes our own salvation, and some won't make it. But how many? Where is the dividing line? What makes the difference?

Satan works by tricking our subconscious nature. We have many natural desires or drives – pleasure, possession, power, sex, etc. and Satan uses those natural desires against us by flipping the script. He can make us believe that something bad is desirable or pleasurable or even good. We don't typically pursue evil but by making it look good, we are tempted toward a perceived good, whatever that may be, even though it may be bad or even evil. The 'Seven Cardinal Sins' are all about natural desires driven toward selfish behavior – pride, greed, etc.

As described in **Truth** above, Satan's power is delusion at the highest level; that's how he works. People who follow Satan are deluded. And they are totally blinded by it.

But, like I said above, we all are equally capable of being deluded on our own – we don't need help from Satan and can't blame him for all the wrong things that we do.

That's a reason for so many of the problems we see throughout history and the world we see every day in the news – wars, drug trafficking and abuse, gun violence, domestic abuse, sexual assault, etc. People who carry out these evil acts are deluded or delusional, believing and acting on false ideas. Unfortunately, many of the world's leaders are also subject to it. And much of the suffering in the world today is caused by their delusion, with or without Satan's influence. Without Satan and evil nature, this world would literally be heaven. With Satan, sometimes and some places are literally hell.

And, unfortunately, we also see it in some religious leaders and supposedly religious people who are just as tempted to follow Satan as anyone else. Jesus says we will know his followers by their love, and we will know the 'false prophets' by their 'fruits,' e.g., lies, hatred, harm and suffering. That applies to all religions, races, cultures or individuals. And, again, people at every level may be totally blinded to recognizing or admitting to it.

Another natural drive we have built into us is fear; we'll do anything or many things to defend ourselves and/or our loved ones from real or perceived threats. Satan uses that fear by presenting us with threats of harm in some way, so we'll react in the opposite way to defend against it. We see the use of fear in many of today's political maneuvers by both sides and, at least to some extent, Satan is behind them. His goal is to divide our community and country in order to weaken us, cause chaos, encourage violence, etc. January 6, 2021 is an example of people driven to violence out of perceived fear instilled by the previous president and his allies.

One would think that most good people would recognize Satan's work in our lives and in our communities, but he is a master of disguises and is hiding in plain sight; we just don't realize it. And, again, Satan flips the script and makes bad things attractive which pulls people into his work. That's a direct and real threat to our ultimate well-being if we're not very careful.

On the other hand, history has many examples of good Christians seeing Satan's work in other people, thereby justifying discrimination, hatred, violence, torture and even murder against them, e.g., the Inquisitions, witchcraft trials and executions, etc., with even some current instances, e.g., against LGBTQI+ people. A Biblical example is the Scribes and Pharisees who fully believed they were doing God's will when they persecuted and crucified Jesus. We see that playbook all around the world in today's national and international strife. We all need to be diligent against doing Satan's work.

But the greatest threat of Satan is pure evil. There are many examples in history of individuals, either as leaders, in groups or just on their own, committing atrocious acts of evil against others for one reason or another or just for the satisfaction of it. Hitler, Stalin and many other dictators directed international wars and genocide. Ted Bundy,

Gary Ridgeway and many others were serial killers. They could only develop such evilness under the influence of Satan. The world has suffered and is currently suffering greatly and unjustly from their evil, e.g., the war in Ukraine, now in Israel, and many other places around the world.

The Church's argument for the tie between sin and suffering is that there would be no suffering if it weren't for sin (evil). That's only a philosophical argument, not reality. There is a direct connection between evil, free will and suffering that I'll address again in those subjects, but for now, all evil traces to Satan, the antithesis of God. If there was no evil, we'd only exist in heaven like angels, if at all – no Satan, no hell. But also, no free will, because if angels/Lucifer could not have chosen evil, they would have had only limited free will. Complete free will requires the option to choose evil. The reality is that angels (and humans) have free will, hence evil and its consequences – suffering, all of which existed from the earliest stages of God's creation, before earth and mankind even existed. Sin didn't enter the world by Adam's fault; it existed in Satan before mankind was created.

Another perspective on Satan and how he works was written by C.S. Lewis in *Screwtape Letters*. While fiction, it describes how Satan's demons tempt their targets in many ways to keep them from knowing or loving God and to pursue selfish desires. An interesting book.

**Why? Why? Why?**

Every evening watching the news, or at my computer reading today's headlines, or while praying for peace and justice, I wonder: why all the wars; why all the suffering; why all the injustice and inequity; why all the violence and crime; why all the poverty and starvation? Thousands of people are killed every day; thousands more are injured or displaced without adequate food or shelter or health care; millions are starving! Why all the cultural 'wars' and divisions where the victims are LGBTQ, or immigrants, or just conservative vs liberal? History for thousands of years is replete with it all and it's roaring today! Why? Why? Why?

Or for that matter, why have so many priests for decades (or centuries that we don't know about) said Mass in the morning and then abused children the same afternoon? But not only Catholic priests. Why is it such a universal problem – adults sexually abusing children or other adults or anyone for that matter? Why?

The Church and people of good will have prayed for all of history for God's intervention. Why doesn't God somehow intervene and stop at least some of it? Why doesn't God intervene and make it better? Why does God allow it to continue unabated? If we humans can't stop it, why doesn't God step in? Doesn't God see what's happening and answer our prayers? Why not?

My answer – **Satan!** All religions, especially Catholic, many other Christians, Judaism, etc., teach us extensively about a personal, loving and merciful God but almost

nothing about the unimaginable evil of Satan. We are literally not taught at all to recognize Satan's works for what they really are. Satan begets evil and God allows anyone freely to follow him. And they do so in droves. Anyone. Everywhere. Always has been and always will be.

And that's the other reason – **free will**. God created the angels with unlimited free will, allowing Lucifer to choose ego and pride to oppose God himself as described above. God allowed Satan's development; Satan chose it. Free will, by definition, can choose evil just as easily as it can choose good. If we/they could only choose good, it would be limited, not completely free will. And that's the real source of original sin – the existence of evil and the freedom to choose it, first by the fallen angels, then by humans hundreds of thousands of years ago and all the rest of us since then. (see chapter on **Free will** below)

We (many people all over the world, including myself) pray every day in the *Our Father – "deliver us from evil*," and yet we don't see the evil right in front of us that we ask to be delivered from. Religions used to make a big deal about recognizing evil in order to avoid it, but then it became over done and resistance grew to pull that message back so now there is little or no effort to teach us about evil. We're taught to not judge (observed evil) and to not call any attention to the evil we see. It may hurt someone's feelings or make them feel ashamed. Don't to that. Of course, it can be overdone when falsely acclaimed and that's wrong, but we just no longer even recognize or admit the evil we see.

There's enough evil to go around on both/all sides. I was talking with a conservative friend about the evil that I saw on that side when she pointed out the evil she saw on the liberal side. And of course, neither of us could see the evil on our own chosen side. That's the way Satan works – flipping the script, making evil look good on both sides. Part of that is due to the high volume of lies and disinformation in our world today. And that again is the way Satan works – lies are his tools.

I've been a Catholic since age 7 (I'm now 83), attended Bible school and CCD through high school, graduated from Seattle University with a strong Jesuit education, and have attended thousands of Masses by dozens of priests. I've read many Catholic books, periodicals and resources and still do nearly every day. Leading Catholics from the Pope through the bishops and many other proponents of God write something every day in the media. But I can only think of a very few times that I've heard a sermon or attended a class or read a resource that provided a significant educational element about Satan.

I've lived through World War II, the Korean war, the Vietnam war, the Gulf wars, the Afghanistan war and many other wars involving other countries than the US, including the current wars in Ukraine and the Israel/Hamas war with the related deaths and sufferings of millions of people and the destruction of entire civilizations. All caused by people or nations following Satan. If nothing else, why has God allowed all that evil

and suffering? Why didn't God intervene with Hitler or Stalin or Putin or any of the other instigators? Why not?

Given the ultimate cause of all the above-listed tragic effects and suffering throughout history and yet we still don't educate ourselves or cultures or citizenry about Satan, the one responsible for it all. That's not entirely true. Every person – me, you, political leaders, and religious leaders, all have the same freedom as Satan to choose evil, with or without his help, and is responsible for their own share in spreading evil.

To be fair, evil is on both sides of our cultural and religious divisions here in the US and around the world. Satan works against everyone, not just one side or the other. Evil has no significant counter-balance in atheistic countries; opposition may be entirely suppressed. Good is defined by what the controlling government says. With no God, all there is to choose is Satan whose existence is also denied. They don't even recognize their own evil.

I don't want to leave the impression that all people in atheist countries are evil; many are just as good or better than we are. I've been to Russia and attended Mass in Moscow. All the people I met there were good people. It's the overall government and its leaders that individually and collectively impose Satan's works, just as Hitler and many other historical dictators did.

But in supposedly 'Christian' or other religious societies, we're at least taught a little about God and human values that should help guide our decisions between good and evil. But we're still not taught about Satan. We don't even recognize his presence when it's entirely visible right in front of us. People even deny it when it's obvious. Why? Why? Why?

In Matthew 7:20, when speaking about 'false prophets' Jesus said, *"So by their fruits you will know them."* In Mark 7:21. Jesus lists: *evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within, and they defile."*

Here's a few that I'd add: lies, hate, cheating, fraud, physical and emotional abuse, especially sexual abuse, injustice, denial of basic human rights, discrimination that causes harm, almost everything that causes harm either mental and/or physical to others, etc. That's how we must recognize Satan's 'fruits.' (see **Natural moral laws** below).

Later, I'll talk about morality but here's the key – look for the good in it and look for the evil in it. The above are examples of evil and they affect both sides of any moral issue, both those who commit it and those who judge it. Sometimes the Church is on the wrong side. Is all murder evil? Is all abortion evil? Is all sex outside of marriage evil? Are all LGBTQI+ evil? No! Is some or much of it evil? That's up to God to judge, not us. Sometimes, the evil is on the side of those who condemn evil when they deny basic human rights, legitimate healthcare and freedom of choice, supposedly in the name of God, the real judge. I think they are CINO's (Christian in name only – *by their fruits you will know them*)

So, my simplistic answer – **Satan and free will**. If God were to intervene at all, he would have to override man's free will. If he were to do that in one single case or situation, he would be choosing to protect some and leave others exposed to it.

The Bible says that God chose the Israelites and subsequently their heirs, i.e., Christians, seemingly to protect them or lead them through all these damaging struggles. But do you really see the evidence that the Israelites have been protected by God? Or Christians? When has God intervened? (perhaps the Exodus and crossing Red Sea thousands of years ago)

I don't believe or see evidence that God takes sides or prevents people from making their own free will choices, good or bad or even evil.

Another part of the answer is – **justice**. God is the epitome of justice so it would be contradictory to favor some people or cultures or religions over others. God has to be impartial in order to judge everyone with unbiased justice. God favors good over evil, so to that extent, he could favor good people over bad, but he still can't step in to impose his solution in some situations but not every other one that cries out for God's help and intervention. If he intervened by his direct will and gave Putin a heart attack to stop the war and suffering in Ukraine, then he should have intervened to stop Hitler or Stalin, or other dictators or evil people throughout history or in the future.

We greatly want and pray for God to intervene and make it all better but that isn't his plan. Unfortunately, suffering is a necessary consequence of an imperfect world. If it were perfect, it would already be heaven and Satan wouldn't exist – but he does and with him, evil and its consequences.

## The spiritual world or nature

God, the angels, Satan and his related evil spirits, all exist in a spiritual world or nature or dimension. They existed before the 'big bang' and the creation of the physical cosmos and now they co-exist with the natural physical world, together yet separate. They exist in different but interconnected dimensions. The simplest description of the difference between the dimensions in the spiritual world is love, with heaven being entirely love; the less love, the further from God, and the literal absence of love is hell.

I think of it all as the stairway to heaven – heaven at the top, hell at the bottom and each step in between reflecting a different dimension of love. The higher levels are more like heaven with more freedom, peace and satisfaction, and vice versa for the lower levels being more like hell. Every human soul, physically alive now or spiritually alive after death, has a spiritual dimension and the measure of their love establishes their position on the stairway relative to God or Satan.

Another resource to better understand the nature of the spiritual world is through the many, various descriptions by people who've had a near-death experience (NDE) and recounted what they experienced in that spiritual realm while their soul was away from their bodies. (see below)

A weak but perhaps relatable description is that the spiritual world is like an enormous theme park with all kinds of venues from dark and scary to bright and beautiful. People who've had an NDE say that our human words cannot come close to describing how fantastic it is. (see later chapters for some of those descriptions)

A key takeaway from those near-death experiences is that the spiritual world is absolutely real, not just an idea of faith or imagination. It is not material in any way but has many similarities to our experience on earth (or perhaps more correctly, life on earth has similarities to the spiritual world). They say all their physical senses were with them at a higher level in that spiritual nature than while in their bodies. They had their intellect and memories intact, and they communicated telepathically in different languages which they clearly understood. Their questions were immediately answered with full understanding.

The spiritual world is essentially God's consciousness (see next below) and the core of that consciousness is God's love. We, as well as angels, are each a unique individual with our own spiritual consciousness, living within God's greater spiritual realm. Our place in that spiritual nature, both while alive here on earth and then after death, is dependent upon our own consciousness and how well it reflects God's nature, i.e., love.

The Bible generally describes heaven and hell with a great divide between them that is impassible, e.g., the parable about Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19-31. That's the difference between the dimensions mentioned above. The Bible doesn't describe purgatory, so we learn about it through the tradition and teaching of the Church from its earliest days. More about that later.

Throughout my life, I've wondered, how does this all work? How does God hear us when we pray? Do we have a little built-in spiritual microphone that we turn on and off?

My analogy is the digital world we now live in, the world wide web, a connection we all have access to and commonly use. The digital infrastructure of phones, computers and other devices, the remote servers and other communication systems including satellites around the earth, somehow provide us with an instant connection to anyone, anywhere, anytime. Our own device accepts our voice, text or video, converts it to digital form and instantly communicates it to the network. Our device is also a receiver from the network allowing us two-way communication. I don't really know how, but I do know it works. Amazing!

Similarly, God is the universal web of the spiritual world, allowing us to connect to and communicate with him at any moment anywhere. And he has the same connection to every other person that has ever lived on earth, including the angels and souls in the spiritual world, so we can communicate with them all through God. Our communication device is our soul, both conscious and subconscious. We communicate with our thoughts, intellect and will, e.g., prayer, which work in our conscious state. The problem

is that our receiver is in our subconscious state, not in our physical senses, that we don't typically turn on or are even aware of. We have to develop our communication ability in order to 'hear' our subconscious senses.

But, like the internet, we aren't connected to God unless we turn on our communication device, i.e., our soul. We can turn it off or ignore it as we choose. It takes a conscious effort to turn it on and communicate with it and even more commitment to try to listen to it. But God doesn't force us to open our soul to him or others; it's entirely a matter of our personal choice to open it or not.

And the same applies to the negative side of the spiritual world, i.e., Satan and all his allies. It's just as easy to open our souls to negative thoughts and motivations as the positive ones. It seems some people only have that side open, e.g., Putin. It's that push and pull within our soul between God and Satan. We have to choose which one to connect to or not.

The spiritual world works in mysterious ways that we can't see or understand and won't until we get into that realm or dimension on the other side of life. I have lots of questions and few answers.

An example is a question about how God (or other spirits) is/are actually involved in some of our everyday life events? Some events just can't be explained so we say it's just a coincidence or an accident or good/bad luck or whatever, without seeing a potential connection to a spiritual explanation. Things really happen to us that seem to have a reason, either good or bad, but we can't see the cause. Is God or some other spiritual being, good or bad, involved?

Why do some people die from strange accidents where just a few inches or a few seconds difference would have saved their lives. I recall a woman who was killed in a freak accident that she would have survived with just a change in those few inches or seconds. A tree fell on a good friend and killed him instantly instead of a foot away and he might have survived. Many car accidents are just a very slight difference in time or distance between survival or fatality. Is it just a coincidence or fate or is there something more that we can't see at work there? Does God influence the cause or the outcome? We typically give God credit for a good outcome or just say a person's death was God's will.

For another example, the Church has taught and motivated millions of people for over 100 years to pray the rosary for numerous causes including peace and the conversion of Russia. Is there real evidence that all that spiritual offering has made a difference? How I wish it were, but it's not apparent in today's reality. Were all those prayers in vain? If God hears all prayers and they are answered in some manner, what's the answer?

Yet God certainly has answered some of the smallest and simplest prayers, most notably in miracles (see more below), so why not on the big problems of humanity? Why is there so much violence and suffering? Why does God let it happen to good people? The answer to my own question is that Satan is also working in the same environment

against everything good. The answer may be that many people are working with or for Satan, even if they don't realize it. What we may see as a failure in God's response to our prayers is perhaps Satan's success in opposing them.

History has shown that another part of the answer is free will. God gave all humans literally unlimited free will to choose and do good or bad, some of which can be very bad. People, groups or nations can do some very bad things, e.g., DUI drivers, and God does not seem to intervene directly to prevent it because interfering would limit their very free will. Putin had the free will to cause war on Ukraine and God allowed him that choice. Justice will come at some point, either in this life or the next, but God doesn't seem to change its course. God allows natural disasters as well as human-caused disasters. More about free will and justice later.

That's all part of the mystery that we can't see or understand because we're human with limited spiritual ability. That's just part of our human condition. We have to pass through the door of death to see the answers.

I believe that my writing, including now typing this text, originates in my subconscious state and somehow, I bring it into my conscious state before and during writing. I attribute much of it to inspiration, not really knowing from whom. That leads me to be thankful for any help from God or others in the spiritual world for their inspiration as well as my life otherwise. And I pray that none of it is coming from the negative side, although some may believe that to be the case.

## Consciousness

Consciousness is an essential element of the spiritual nature of living beings, both in the spiritual realm, i.e., God, angels, heaven et al, and in the material realm, i.e. within the brains or minds of living beings here on earth, not limited to mankind. It's a broad subject with lots of resources that go far beyond my writing here – just look it up on the internet.

I've seen and read a lot about consciousness recently, particularly in the book, ***Proof of Heaven***. (see below) And then, once you look it up on your web browser, the subject will pop up all over the place, thinking it's what you want, when you just wanted to satisfy your curiosity.

But I do want to address several aspects of it. I've read a few articles that scientists have theorized about a 'consciousness' in the material world that goes beyond living beings, in an attempt to explain how the cosmos works without any acceptance of the existence or causality of God. They say that consciousness exists at the sub-atomic level in all matter, including and throughout the entire cosmos.

My understanding is that **God and the reality of the spiritual world IS the 'consciousness'** that the scientists are observing but cannot bring themselves to accept, so they try to find and theorize materialistic alternatives. God created all the natural laws and environmental conditions that govern the material world and give it that apparent

consciousness – the way the material world reacts to other materials and forces in measurable and predictable ways. The natural laws of science, i.e., physics, chemistry, energy, etc. are a direct expression of God's consciousness. God **IS** that invisible consciousness in the material universe.

It's difficult for us to comprehend consciousness in the spiritual realm because we are so limited by our own physical nature and how we perceive reality – things we can see or touch or measure. We see things as discreet individual entities and every entity can only exist as a singular being in a unique place. None of those limitations apply to God who is unlimited in nature. God's consciousness/nature is universal, everywhere, always.

God's consciousness could be like his nervous system, his senses, his awareness of everything that is happening, everywhere, always. But just because God is present in his consciousness does not mean that he is causing everything directly through his will. He created all the natural laws and forces and then lets them do their thing without intervention. Similarly, God gave all animals, including humans, a brain and their own consciousness to manage their own lives without his continual, personal intervention.

Similarly, we don't really know how God may work through the angels, but it seems that they may play an important role in how God's consciousness works – through the angels. And to the extent that God may intervene in living beings, it may be through the angels who know and carry out God's will.

When we pray, *"thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,"* it seems we are expecting God's personal will to intervene in what's happening in our lives, but I think, while God certainly does influence our lives, he allows us to do as we choose without interfering or causing the results.

As such, God is in continuous connection with all of his creation, including each and everyone who has ever existed. And because humans also have a spiritual life after death, God's consciousness is connected to all deceased souls forever (and they with him).

As you'll see in later discussion about near-death experiences where people have actually experienced being in the presence of God, every person, both alive and deceased, has their own unique relationship with God. They each experience it directly, personally, but we can't sense or are not conscious of that relationship while we're still within our limited body, our physical-only nature. But we can and do have that relationship in our subconscious nature, we just don't sense it.

And because God gave each of us free will, God doesn't normally use that connection to force us or impact us directly. But there some events in our lives that seem could only have occurred through God's intervention or influence that just can't be explained, but God's presence or consciousness can be seen in the outcome.

Part of the problem with this discussion is a misuse of the term 'consciousness' to mean something that can somehow be observed and measured such as the forces of

nature to explain why they act or react in patterned ways. They are all just reacting to the natural laws of God that govern all creation.

The proper understanding of 'consciousness' is from the standpoint of a living being (materially or spiritually) with a brain that can interpret its own senses and then self-determine how to react.

In the animal kingdom, consciousness resides in and is relative to their brain and its capability. It works through their natural instincts. In humans, consciousness is both physical as in other animals but also spiritual in nature, a gift from God in likeness to his own nature. That gift allows us to share in God's spiritual nature.

But our consciousness, while we are still here in our bodies, is generally limited to our physical nature with a few notable exceptions. We can't see or hear or touch the spiritual world around us but there are a variety of exceptions to that limitation when living people can and do experience the spiritual realm.

The most notable example is Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead on Easter and his physical appearance to his disciples. But that physical appearance also had a spiritual dimension, e.g., he could appear out of nowhere in a locked room. Similarly, our Holy Mother, Mary, appeared to real people at Guadalupe, Lourdes, and Fatima. Visits by angels and saints have been documented throughout history. Souls from purgatory appeared to Maria Simma over 60 years. (see ***Get Us Out Of Here!!*** later) Many people have reported near-death experiences in the spiritual realm out-of-body. And there are all kinds of paranormal experiences that may or may not be real events of spiritual consciousness.

In discussion of near-death experiences below, we'll see a lot more about the nature of our consciousness after death.

## Miracles

Another aspect of the spiritual world is that it's 'supernatural.' One of the ways we experience supernatural events is through miracles.

*A miracle is an event that is inexplicable by natural or scientific laws and accordingly gets attributed to some supernatural or praeter-natural cause. Various religions often attribute a phenomenon characterized as miraculous to the actions of a supernatural being, (especially) a deity, a magician, a miracle worker, a saint, or a religious leader.*

*A true miracle would, by definition, be a non-natural phenomenon, leading many writers to dismiss miracles as physically impossible (that is, requiring violation of established laws of physics within their domain of validity) or impossible to confirm by their nature (because all possible physical mechanisms can never be ruled out). The former position is expressed (for instance) by Thomas Jefferson, and the latter by David Hume. Theologians typically say that, with divine providence, God regularly works*

*through nature yet, as a creator, may work without, above, or against it as well.* (Wikipedia)

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) describes a miracle as: *a sign or wonder, such as a healing or the control of nature, which can only be attributed to divine power. The miracles of Jesus were messianic signs of the presence of God's kingdom.*

For Christians, miracles play a significant role in their belief in Jesus' divinity, i.e., his ability to perform supernatural powers over sickness and even death, evil spirits, and nature itself. The New Testament describes many miracles by Jesus and reportedly by his disciples. Without such miracles, Jesus might have been seen as just another wise man or prophet but not necessarily as the Son of God. Miracles take it to the supernatural level.

Subsequently, the Catholic Church has, throughout its history, particularly investigated reported miracles to determine if they are really true signs of supernatural intervention or just unexplainable events. The canonization of saints requires at least two verified miracles attributable to the intervention of the deceased person being considered. It seems many are medical curing of otherwise incurable injuries or diseases, similar to Jesus' giving sight to the blind, curing diseases, enabling the disabled or raising Lazarus from the dead. There are lots of documented miracles attributed to the intervention of the saints.

Another form of miracles are the documented visions or visitations of Mary, Jesus' holy mother. The Church has definitively determined and celebrates Mary's miraculous visits at Guadalupe, Mexico in 1531, Lourdes, France in 1858, and Fatima, Portugal in 1917. Many other such visitations have been claimed and some believed but the Church has not validated them to be categorically true. They may have been true but are considered private revelations, not certified and approved apparitions.

A recent CBS *60 Minutes* program focused on the miracles at Lourdes. There have been 70 confirmed miracles there. You can see it at: *Sanctuary of our Lady of Lourdes miracles*, (see Bibliography for link)

To me, another amazing miracle is called the stigmata, where men have or do currently experience the wounds and suffering of Christ's torture and crucifixion. The most visible symptom is a bleeding wound on both sides of each hand, the reflection of Jesus' crucifixion, which neither heals nor gets infection. Padre Pio, 1887-1968, is the most notable example and he also experienced other miraculous events. You can read about Padre Pio on the internet and in other books. (see Bibliography for a link)

More recently, a man in Michigan by the published name, Francis, experienced the stigmata as documented by a priest in the book, *'Francis', a true story– Family Man Suffers Passion of Jesus Daily* by Fr. Robert J. Fox, 1997. Francis suffered the pains of Christ's torture and crucifixion every night for years with great bodily suffering. He also had stigmata on his hands. The book is true (with pictures) but the man's real name has

been withheld for privacy purposes until the Church has completed its validation process.

My theory regarding miracles is similar to my theory of God's methods of creation (see below), i.e., that God intervenes in the genetic makeup of the diseased or disabled cells to correct the malfunction with healthy new cells.

We also believe that other spiritual entities – angels, saints, deceased loved ones – might be God's agents in administering miracles. For example, St. Anthony of Padua is often prayed to for finding lost or stolen items. He is also the patron saint of travelers and is prayed to for safe travels. A number of such miracles have been attributed to St. Anthony. And the same goes for many other saints.

Similarly, we're taught to pray to our 'guardian angels' whom we believe God has given each of us for our protection. The same could be said for praying to our deceased loved ones for their intercession at times when we need their support. I pray multiple times every day in thanksgiving to all those in heaven that may provide support, guidance, care, and protection for us.

Miracles are real but not every claimed miracle is valid, so they need to be rigorously documented and verified by reputable authorities. But just the fact that they do exist is another verification of the spiritual nature of the world and life after death.

**The Holy Eucharist**

But the greatest 'miracle' for the Catholic Church is the Holy Eucharist, literally and truly the 'Body of Christ.' Ever since the Last Supper over two thousand years ago, Catholics have celebrated Jesus' gift of his body and blood in the Holy Eucharist, the central action in the Holy Mass.

The Eucharist was pre-figured in Jesus' multiplication of the loaves and fishes to feed the multitudes, i.e., Matthew 14:13-21; Matthew 15:32-38; Mark 6:34-44; Mark 8:1-10; Luke 9:10-17; and John 6:1-15. Jesus fed five thousand in one event and four thousand in another simply by blessing the loaves and fishes then distributing them to the crowds. While handing them out, the meager food supply was miraculously and continuously replenished until the entire crowd was fed with many baskets of food left over. Similarly, the Holy Eucharist is miraculously and continuously replenished in the Mass and is fed to the faithful under the appearance of bread and wine.

The basis for belief in Christ's gift of his body and blood is similarly based in Scripture, i.e., Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:14-20; and John 6:22-59. The first three describe the Last Supper and Jesus' words, *"this is my body"* and *"this is my blood"*:

*While they were eating, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and giving it to his disciples said, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the*

*covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins.* (Matthew's version)

John's description doesn't include that part of the Last Supper but writes about Jesus' foretelling it:

*I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst. --- The Jews murmured about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven," --- Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and that bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.*

*The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. --- Then many of his disciples who were listening said, "This saying is hard; who can accept it?"*

It's also mentioned in the following books of the Bible, but I didn't read through them to find all the references. It's historically clear that Jesus' disciples took these words literally and made it an important, perhaps the most important part of their liturgies from the very beginning and it remains so throughout today's Catholic Church in the Mass, celebrated around the world for thousands of years.

The Church describes this miracle as 'transubstantiation'. CCC 1376 says:
*The Council of Trent summarizes the Catholic faith by declaring, "Because Christ our Redeemer said that it was truly his body that he was offering under the species of bread, it has always been the conviction of the Church of God, and this Holy Council now declares again, that by the consecration of the bread and wine, there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation."*

To further reinforce the reality of the 'body and blood' of Christ being truly present in the Holy Eucharist, there have been many miracles throughout these thousands of years where the 'bread' takes on real forms of flesh and blood. See the internet for 'Eucharistic Miracles,' and more specifically 'Carlo Acutis,' 1991-2006 who is now being beatified as a saint (with at least two miracles attributed to his intervention). Carlo died at age 15. *He is on track to become the first canonized millennial in the Catholic church.* --- (Wikipedia)

*Carlos Acutis was a young Italian computer programmer who built a website to document eucharistic miracles around the world. He cataloged more than 150 miracles,*

*listing them by country and date in nearly 20 different languages. For each miracle, he created a web page that could be downloaded and printed, and he also included maps, videos, and a virtual museum on the site. The website Carlo created was the genesis of The Eucharistic Miracles of the World, an international exhibition which highlights such occurrences.* (Wikipedia) I've seen that exhibit, and it continues to be displayed at local Catholic Churches around the world, including my own parish.

*In Christianity, a Eucharistic miracle is any miracle involving the Eucharist. The Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Oriental Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox, Moravian and Anglican Churches believe that Christ is really made manifest in the Eucharist and deem this a Eucharistic miracle; however, this is to be distinguished from other manifestations of God. The Catholic Church distinguishes between divine revelation, such as the Eucharist, and* ***private revelation, such as Eucharistic miracles. In general, reported Eucharistic miracles usually consist of unexplainable phenomena such as consecrated Hosts visibly transforming into myocardium tissue, being preserved for extremely long stretches of time, surviving being thrown into fire, bleeding, or even sustaining people for decades****.* (Wikipedia)

See Wikipedia for a much more comprehensive description of 'Eucharistic Miracles.'

Another resource that provides a video perspective of the nature of the Holy Mass, is *The Veil Removed*, https://theveilremoved.com/. It emphasizes the presence of Jesus as well as many angels and saints in each celebration of the Mass. The prayers in the liturgy also include references to the saints. The Church calls this the 'communion of saints.'

*The communion of saints, when referred to persons, is the spiritual union of the members of the Christian Church, living and the dead, but excluding the damned. They are all part of a single "mystical body", with Christ as the head, in which each member contributes to the good of all and shares in the welfare of all.*

*The earliest known use of this term to refer to the belief in a mystical bond uniting both the living and the dead in a confirmed hope and love is by Saint Nicetas of Remesiana (c. 335–414); the term has since then played a central role in formulations of the Christian creed. Belief in the communion of saints is affirmed in the Apostles' Creed.* (which is included in the liturgy of every Mass) (Wikipedia)

This all together describes why the Holy Mass is central to the Catholic faith – sharing directly and personally the Body of Christ, in communion with the saints who are also sharing in the Holy Mass.

Unfortunately, while this holy communion with Jesus and the saints is true for all those who practice their Catholic faith, we are all still very human and that holy sharing doesn't seem to significantly alter our behavior. It can and should, but it's not making most of us saints in this life. We walk out of Mass and return to our normal behavior, some of which doesn't reflect the presence of Christ in our lives.

It's a hidden miracle seen through the eyes of faith.

## Death

Like I said at the beginning, death is certain; all living beings of all kinds and natures on earth are mortal. But there's a lot more to learn and understand about death itself.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) 1066 says: *In a sense, bodily death is natural, but for faith it is in fact "the wages of sin."* 1008 says: *Death is a consequence of sin. The Church's Magisterium, as authentic interpreter of the affirmations of Scripture and Tradition, teaches that death entered the world on account of man's sin. Even though man's nature is mortal, God had destined him not to die. Death was therefore contrary to the plans of God, the Creator, and entered the world as a consequence of sin.*

I have a problem with that because the foundation for that premise is the Biblical description of creation (see **Creation – Biblical version** below), the fall of Adam and Eve and the 'original sin' of mankind. Genesis' description is a myth, not reality, and should not be the basis for an objective teaching on death.

And it's self-contradictory – *"man's nature is mortal, but God destined him not to die."* I'm thinking pretty hard into this and just don't see that. God created mankind in a manner known though science and revelation, but I just don't see immortality anywhere in this picture.

To me, original sin came about through Lucifer's fall, not Adam's. Sin and death both existed billions of years before man evolved through God's creation. No earthly, living body of any kind was created immortal, including humankind (angels are immortal living beings but entirely spiritual in nature). However, we believe, as discussed in this book, that **man's soul is in fact immortal, just not his body**; that's the part that the Church gets right.

Sin is a direct and inevitable outcome of angels and mankind having God-given free will. If there were a limit on what an angel or man could do in moral terms, then he/it wouldn't really have complete free will. If an evil thing can be done and man has a free will, he can choose that evil. And that had nothing to do with Genesis' story of creation.

Further, it's hard to understand what the last 2-300,000 years would look like if the first humans, Homo sapiens, and every single person that ever lived sense then were all still alive today, which would have to be the case if they were in fact, not destined to die. But to make a realistic understanding of a myth is speculation, not knowledge.

Another concern is that the use of the term 'Magisterium' implies that the Church has the God-given knowledge and authority to proclaim this as truth even in spite of the reality of the creation of the earth and humanity (see later below). It seems to be speculation to defend the indefensible story of the Garden of Eden. And to be so emphatic about it hurts their credibility.

Of course, the Catechism goes on in great length to discuss death, primarily the theological aspects, and the relationship of our death to Jesus Christ's own sacrifice and death to which we are also fundamentally tied.

Another Church perspective on death is provided in an online series by Good Catholic titled: ***Purgatory – Cleansing Fire*** (more from that resource later). In Session 3 it says: ***What Exactly is Death?*** *Death, then, is defined as the separation of the soul from the body.* ***When our soul departs from it, our body will die, because the soul is the animating principle of the body****.*

The above statement isn't consistent with natural reality. Science and medicine have better definitions of death. The body dies from illnesses of many kinds – heart or kidney or other failure, cancers of many kinds, dementia and other brain disorders, etc. The body dies from external causes of many kinds – accidents, gun shots, stabbings, falls, etc. The body dies when any one of those causes stops the heart or the brain from functioning. The body can't live without those two things both functioning. The coroner never says the cause of death was the soul just left the body to die; there's always a real, physical cause of death. The soul leaves because the body has died, not that its departure caused the death.

If I interpret that statement correctly, it says that humans are different from all other animals because we have a soul, and they don't, which is true. A cat or dog or any other animal doesn't have an immortal soul (according to our belief and definition) but they do have life, so how/why is our soul 'the animating principle of the body' but not theirs? What is their 'animating principle'? An animal doesn't die because its soul departed; it dies from natural illnesses or external causes (accidents, violence). And so do humans.

Yes, humans have a soul that is a necessary integral part of our life, and our soul departs our body when we die, but our death occurs because of other natural or external reasons, not just because our soul departs. That idea is closely tied to the concept that we die when God decides to take our soul away from our body, not because we just had a heart attack or were hit by a car or any other natural or external cause. That would mean that God caused the heart attack or car accident which I don't believe to be objectively true. Is God causing the drunk driver to kill a pedestrian or others? Or is God causing the gunman to go into a store and shoot people? Or for that matter, is Satan sometimes really the cause of much death? That seems more real than saying God did it.

I do believe that God is involved in our death or a near-miss. Why/how did someone escape death in a terrible accident when others were killed? Why/how did that falling tree land on top of a person and kill them instead of next to them and they survived? Why/how did a person survive a severe accident or illness that normally would have killed them? God was somehow involved, perhaps even miraculously.

But we die because we are mortal beings, living in a world and environment that both supports our life but also takes it away through many different causes. We are constantly exposed to potential death from internal or external causes. God created this world and the environment we live in with all kinds of natural forces that can kill us. God created the features and functions of our bodies but left them subject to illnesses and malfunctions. God created our bodies to die somehow. Yes, God does have a role in our life and death, but I don't believe that reality shows God directly causing of our death by taking our soul. Vice versa, God takes our soul when our body dies from other causes.

*What is the line between life and death? Here's my answer.* By Peter Singer, Washington Post, October 17, 2023

(see bibliography for link to this and other related articles for the complete narrative; the following is my summary)

The Uniform Law Commission met in summer 2023 to debate the medical definition of death. Currently, the accepted practice is based on brain death, not heart stoppage, because EMT's and emergency rooms in hospitals are trained and apply heart resuscitation many times every day, saving lives, so brain death is used as the determining factor.

That becomes critical to organ transplant procedures. Organs are taken after death but are more successful if the heart is still pumping blood immediately before the procedure, so they put the dying person on life support until they can complete it. Determining that person is still 'alive' while on 'life support' would require postponing the procedure until the person is otherwise 'dead' and risking its success.

Yet many instances occur when a 'life' can be maintained for a long time by keeping a brain-dead person on life-sustaining medical equipment and treatment. Examples are women being kept 'alive' on life support so that their fetus can continue to grow and develop until they can be safely delivered by C-section. A different example was Jahi McMath who was brain-dead but kept 'alive' for 4 ½ years at her mother's insistence until her heart stopped and they took her off life support. During that time, her body continued to physically develop, including experiencing her first period. Was she alive or not?

The Commission could not reach a consensus and dispersed so the question is still open. The author offers a new definition - ***irrevocable loss of consciousness***. To me, that's closer to the idea that's when the soul is gone. The reality is, the brain has both conscious and subconscious elements, the latter keeping the body alive while on life support treatment even after the loss of consciousness. The person only remains alive because of the extraordinary use of life-supporting treatment. Stopping such treatment may quickly or shortly result in death, but not always. Many people are then moved to hospice care for as long as needed until death. Ex-president Carter was in hospice care for a very long time.

That issue is very commonly addressed in medical health directives, like I and many others have filed, that instruct our family and medical professionals to remove life support when they determine that life itself is not recoverable. Mine says, *"where the application of life-sustaining treatment would only serve to artificially prolong the process of my dying."* And, *"I want hydration as a comfort measure only and not in life-sustaining amounts (IV fluids); and I do not want medically-assisted nutrition by tube."* It's ok to pull the plug. But not everyone agrees, i.e., many believe that life must be preserved at all costs, period.

*Can secular health care institutions be trusted to make a moral brain death policy?* Story by Religion News Service, April 29, 2024

This article writes about the exact same concern but from a different perspective, that the brain-death standard discriminates against disadvantaged, handicapped, colored people, etc., sometimes in order to qualify them more readily as organ donors and avoiding life-extending treatment. It said that the concept of 'brain death' was introduced in 1969 by the Harvard Brain Death Commission, that if the brain was dead and the life of the body was being sustained artificially, they could free it up for organ donation.

It refers to *the Uniform Determination of Death Act, the legal foundation for the declaration of brain death in the United States, stipulated that determination of brain death must be made in accordance with accepted medical standards. In 2018, multiple medical societies agreed that the accepted medical standards for determination of brain death were the 2010 AAN guideline for adults and the 2011 Society of Critical Care Medicine (SCCM)/American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)/Child Neurology Society guideline for infants and children. These guidelines stipulate that* ***brain death should be declared when a patient with a known cause of catastrophic brain injury has permanent loss of function of the <u>entire</u> brain****, including the brainstem, resulting in (1) coma, (2) brainstem areflexia, and (3) apnea in the setting of an adequate stimulus.* (my emphasis, see Bibliography for link to internet)

The article then states that the American Academy of Neurology (AAN) subsequently published a report that *rejected "whole brain death" language, replacing it with concern for functioning of the "brain as a whole." Specifically,* ***AAN claims the whole brain does not need to be dead****;* ***instead, some neuroendocrine function*** *(such as in the hypothalamus)* ***can persist and a human being still be declared dead****.*

The argument goes on that, under that policy, some people are declared dead because key parts of the brain were dead but some of their brain was still functioning (perhaps only subconsciously) and they are therefore still 'alive,' for their own sake and not just as an organ donor.

As you see, life and death are not a simple 'on or off switch'; it's complex and subjective; even the experts don't all agree.

## Near-death experiences (NDE)

Near-death experiences are described by individuals who have literally died for one reason or another, been rescued or resuscitated back to life, and then tell us about what they experienced apart from their body. They tell us a lot about what life after death really looks like from their extraordinary personal experience.

NDE Definition: *"A lucid experience associated with perceived consciousness apart from the body occurring at the time of actual or threatened imminent death."* (internet)

While non-believers may deny it, there is a lot of documentation of immediate life after death where people have actually died and subsequently returned to life to describe their experience. The book, *Evidence of the Afterlife* by Dr. Jeffrey Long with Paul Perry is about *"The Science of Near-Death Experiences."* Dr. Long established the Near-Death Experience Research Foundation, (nderf.org), as mentioned in the **Introduction**. They have collected thousands of individual peoples' descriptions of their NDE from all over the world and evaluated them in a scientific process. Dr. Long describes twelve elements of these experiences, such as out-of-body experience, heightened senses, encountering a mystical or brilliant light, etc. The book then includes nine 'proofs' for the reality of life after death from that research. Dr. Long was one of the presenters in the documentary, ***After Death*** discussed below.

Some (but not all) NDE people describe an immediate out-of-body experience where they can see and hear the people and activities around their literally dead body (dead because the soul of the person is outside of it). Some described things that occurred out of sight or sound that could not have somehow been sensed by their dead body and then been found to be true. They could have only known it if they were in fact somehow 'alive' and present yet outside of their body, seeing and hearing it.

Another compelling argument for the reality of out-of-body experience is by totally blind people describing the very real things that they 'saw' that they never could have 'seen' with their physical senses. More about that in ***After Death*** below.

That speaks not only of their consciousness at the time (after death) but also their ability to experience it through their senses of sight and hearing which, by definition, are tied to the body which now can't experience any senses. That must mean we take at least some of our physical senses with us in our soul after death. The soul has to have some sensual abilities in order to perceive and experience life after death.

If they get beyond that point, they describe being in or traveling through a spiritual environment which varies from one NDE to another. At some point, their body is revived, and their soul returns to their body and 'life' so they can subsequently describe the experience.

That brings up the point that life after death is literally a state of mind – our soul in complete spiritual life, no longer bound by our body. And it's the state of our soul at the time of our death – who we are at that moment, including the entirety of our life

memories, experiences and knowledge as well as our conscience regarding our good and bad thoughts and deeds – the choices we've made up to that point. And especially, it includes the responsibility for our choices with full accountability.

Another very interesting description of a near-death experience is in the book, *Falling into Heaven* by Mickey Robinson. In one chapter, he describes his near-death experience from inside the 'light' in the very real presence of God, the most detailed and profound description that I've found. Most NDE are concluded before actually arriving at the 'light'; many see the light but return to life before experiencing it as Mr. Robinson did. (see the chapter, **Heaven,** for some of his description)

**NDE's are revelation** (in my opinion). Revelation, in the context of life after death, *is* ***the divine or supernatural disclosure to humans of something relating to human existence*** *or the world; in religion and theology; revelation is* ***the disclosing of some form of truth or knowledge through communication with a deity*** *or other supernatural entity or entities.* (internet)

CCC Glossary: ***Revelation is God's communication of himself, by which he makes known the mystery of his divine plan****, a gift of self-communication which is realized by deeds and words over time, and most fully by sending us his own divine Son, Jesus Christ.*

It seems to me that near-death experiences are a form of God's revelation and should be considered as such, with proper review by qualified authorities (including others than clergy alone) as they do with other perhaps divine interventions, e.g., miracles. But they are outside of the Catholic teaching that *"no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ,"* (CCC 66) i.e., the end of time and the second coming. It goes on to say, *"Yet even if Revelation is already complete,* ***it has not been made completely explicit****; it remains for Christian faith gradually to grasp its full significance over the course of the centuries."* That leaves it at least somewhat open for discussion.

CCC 67 could also open some consideration of NDE where it talks about *"****private' revelations****, some of which have been recognized by the authority of the Church. They do not belong, however, to the deposit of faith."* But it doesn't seem the Church is paying any attention to the potential 'private' revelation in NDE, even though they are experiences of people dealing directly and personally with God after death. I think there is much that the Church could gain by giving it serious attention.

NDEs alone would be quite interesting but would not be enough to base an entire picture of God and life after death; they are just another piece of the puzzle. I've not seen evidence that they are part of any religious movement, so they stay in the general picture but not in an organized religious one. That may make more sense to those non-affiliated, non-religious people, as described in the documentary, ***After Death***, immediately following.

## *After Death*

***After Death*** is a documentary video by Angel Studios about near-death experiences (NDE). It includes seven filmed narratives by different individuals of their own NDE. Several of them subsequently wrote books about their experiences 'after dying.' It also includes extensive commentary by several doctors, scientists and researchers who have studied and written about NDE.

This brief summary includes identifying the participants in the video, either as having had a NDE and describing it, or what they've learned from interviews and research about NDE. The video presents the speakers in a mixed and overlapping fashion, but I represent them below in a more orderly, chronological order.

I also include a brief bio or related information about the person from internet sources as well as books they've written. This summary is just the tip of the iceberg relative to NDE but is helpful in our understanding the reality of life after death.

Angel Studios is not able to grant permission to quote from the video because the copyright may belong to the individuals rather than the Studio, so I'm limited in what I can present directly from the presenters' statements. What they said in their own words is the most important message so, if you wish to get their full message, you may need to obtain or otherwise view the video, ***After Death***.

**Dr. George Ritchie**. Jr (1923-2007) was one of the first doctor/scientists to publicly talk about NDE. Dr. Ritchie was a leading American psychiatrist who had a near-death experience himself in 1943 while in the Army. Dr. Ritchie wrote of his near-death experience in *Return from Tomorrow*, co-written with Elizabeth Sherrill, and published in 1978. In the book, he tells of his out-of-body experience, his meeting with Jesus Christ, and his travel with Christ through different dimensions of time and space. Later he published another book, *Ordered to Return: My Life After Dying*, to elaborate on his heavenly experience.

Dr. Ritchie was just mentioned in the video, not as a participant (died in 2007), but he was influential on several of the doctors and scientists in the video.

**Dr. Raymond Moody**, M.D, Ph.D., *is an American philosopher, psychiatrist, physician and author, most widely known for his books about afterlife and near-death experiences (NDE), a term that he coined in 1975 in his best-selling book, Life After Life.* (see Wikipedia for a more complete description of Dr. Moody's background and also statements by a number of critics of Dr. Moody's work)

Dr. Moody's first contact with NDE during his post-graduate studies was meeting Dr. Ritchie (above) and hearing his NDE story. That led Dr. Moody to investigate over 150 cases of NDEs which he wrote about in his book, *Life After Life,* and two other books that followed.

In the video, Dr. Moody said that NDE's were relatively uncommon until CPR became widely practiced which greatly increased the number of people who were resuscitated from NDE and subsequently reported it.

He described some of the typical things people experience in NDEs. They also say that this experience has convinced them that ***what life is all about is learning to love***.

**Dale Black**, airplane pilot and flight examiner, airplane crash victim and author of *Visiting Heaven: Heavenly Keys to a Life Without Limitations,* 2023

In the video, Mr. Black described his near-death experience in detail. He described seeing God in the light and inside of that light was love.

The following quote is from Wikipedia, not the video: *As the only survivor of a horrific plane crash, he encountered the spectacular glories of Heaven. After regaining consciousness, Dale made a supernatural physical recovery, and against all odds went on to become a jet pilot, aviation safety specialist, and award-winning airline pilot instructor. Today, he inspires people worldwide by sharing about the glories of Heaven and the love of God which he encountered during his life-changing visit to Heaven.*

**Dr. Michael Sabom**, Cardiologist, Researcher

The following quote is from Wikipedia, not the video: *Dr. Sabom is known for his work on near-death experiences. He is a founding member of the International Association for Near Death Studies. www.iands.org,*

*Dr. Sabom has written two books about near-death experiences. The first book, Recollections of Death: A Medical Investigation, was released in 1982. Sabom presented interviews with 116 people who had experienced a near-death crisis, which he discusses and classifies. This book was positively received for providing a relatively objective and medically based point of view, though one reviewer speculated that the "author's wish to believe may have colored his analysis." The second book, Light and Death, was released in 1998. Similarly to the first book, Sabom interviewed 160 patients following near-death crises. Although it still retained some medical and scientific aspects, this book was written from a more religious viewpoint.*

Dr. Sabom commented frequently throughout the video about NDE and his extensive interviews with people who had near-death experiences. Dr. Sabom had always been a skeptic of NDE and approached his studies that way. With his colleague (name unrecognizable in video), they devised a scientific protocol to interview these people, tape recorded (old analog tech) the interviews and gathered data about each patient. This went on for five years. His purpose was to reduce the subjectivity of the NDE descriptions in a rigorous and scientific process.

He described his findings as evidence about the reality of life after death – *with enough evidence, most people would believe that it's real*.

**Dr. Jeffrey Long**, Oncologist, Researcher, NY Times best-selling author of *Evidence of the Afterlife***.** Dr. Long was one of the 'experts' who presented extensively in this documentary.

See Wikipedia for a more detailed and complete description. Here are a few key points:

*Dr. Long established the Near Death Experience Research Foundation (NDERF) in 1998. The foundation maintains a website, www.nderf.org, also launched in 1998, and a database of more than 5000 cases, which is the world's largest collection of near-death reports. He is on the board of directors of the American Center for the Integration of Spiritually Transformative Experiences (ACISTE).*

*Long asserts that* ***peace and love are the two words most commonly used by people who describe what they believe to be NDEs****. In 2014, the NDERF said that an average of 774 NDEs happened each day in the United States.*

In the video, Dr. Long said that no two NDEs are exactly the same, though many have common similarities on which he has based his conclusions. Like Dr. Sabom, above, enough evidence makes a strong case for scientific conclusions.

Out-of-body experience is very common in NDEs, that is being literally alive and present in a spiritual form outside of their body yet fully conscious of things happening

around their 'dead' body that they could not have sensed from their physical body. They witnessed their situation just like someone else in the room at the time.

They have heightened senses of sight and hearing, describing beautiful sights and music beyond anything they've experienced on earth.

He described a particular NDE in 1960 by a five-year old blind girl who drowned in a lake and later described things around her accident scene that she could not have seen in her living body while she was totally under water and unconscious.

**Howard Storm**, Professor, NDE victim in Paris, France 1985, Author of *My Descent into Death*, *A Second Chance at Life,*

The following is from the description of his book on Amazon, not the video: *Storm, an avowed atheist, was awaiting emergency surgery when he realized that he was at death's door. Storm found himself out of his own body, looking down on the hospital room scene below. Next, rather than going "toward the light," he found himself being torturously dragged to excruciating realms of darkness and death, where he was physically assaulted by monstrous beings of evil. His description of his pure terror and torture is unnerving in its utter originality and convincing detail.*

*Finally, drawn away from death and transported to the realm of heaven, Storm met angelic beings as well as the God of Creation. In this fascinating account, Storm tells of his "life review," his conversation with God, even answers to age-old questions such as why the Holocaust was allowed to take place. Storm was sent back to his body with a new knowledge of the purpose of life here on earth. This book is his message of hope.*

The following is taken from Wikipedia, not the video: *Storm stated that over time, the experience never faded as memories and dreams do. He became involved with a church, studied for a Master of Divinity from the United Theological Seminary, entered the seminary, and was ordained. He served as pastor of the Zion United Church of Christ in Norwood, Ohio, from 1992 to 2005, and he was also a former pastor of the United Church of Christ in Covington, Ohio*.

Mr. Storm had a severe stomach rupture while on a trip to Europe, went to a hospital and literally died. His NDE began with a fully conscious, out-of-body experience in the hospital room. In the video, he described his NDE in great detail, including a very dark and scary period before he turned to Jesus and transformed his experience into a positive conversion of love.

With that, he returned to his body and woke. He had been in surgery for hours. When he became able, he told his wife about his experience and that it's all about love. She just replied, "I love you, now get some rest." She didn't' understand what he was talking about.

After his recovery, he wanted to tell everyone about his experience, but no one would listen, and it backfired. Almost everyone didn't believe him, turned against him and thought he was crazy.

The one good thing that came from this was his reunion with his father. He realized that his father had himself been a victim of abuse which made him abusive.

**Don Piper**, auto accident victim NDE, NY Times best-selling author of *90 Minutes in Heaven*,

*Don Piper, an ordained Baptist minister since 1985, has recounted his* (NDE) *narrative before 3,000 live audiences that included more than 1.5 million people*

*altogether, and has appeared on numerous television and radio programs*. (Wikipedia, not the video)

Don Piper was killed in a terrible wreck on a stormy night in 1989 when a truck crossed into his lane and ran over his car. He was killed instantly. Just as quickly, he was standing at the gates of heaven.

He was surrounded by people he loved. His senses were heightened and very real. He looked through the gates into a heavenly city that appeared to be of gold. He wanted to enter the city, climb that hill and say thank you to God for letting him come.

Just as quickly, the NDE stopped, and he was in the hospital. When he woke, he said he wanted to go home. His wife didn't realize it, but he was speaking about his heavenly home, not his earthly one. He didn't want to return to earthly life but didn't have a choice. Ahead lay a difficult and painful recovery. He became depressed and unresponsive to his wife who had as much difficulty dealing with that. She finally realized that she had to accept what she couldn't understand.

**John Burke**, NDE researcher: *John Burke is the founder and former lead pastor of Gateway Church, a multi-site church based in Austin, Texas, which has grown to more than 4,500 people since its start in 1998. He is also the president of Gateway Leadership Initiative, a non-profit organization. John has authored several books including, No Perfect People Allowed, Soul Revolution, and The New York Times best-seller, Imagine Heaven. As an international speaker, John has addressed hundreds of thousands of people in 20 countries on topics of leadership and spiritual growth. Learn more about John at his website, www.JohnBurkeOnline.com*.

Also see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7BXP1c-x8E, where he talks about parallels between NDE testimony and scripture.

John Burke has researched over 1,000 NDEs and spoke repeatedly in the video. He was originally an agnostic but became aware of NDE while his father was dying of cancer. He then began his effort to research NDE. I'll mention just some key comments.

NDEs are not just a new thing. There is reference to them in ancient history and in the Bible.

We are the same people after death, we have our memories and our humor. The 'other side' is a place where love, life, and beauty come out of everything.

Not everyone experiences the same elements, each one is unique, but there are many commonalities. Yet each one feels like they are the only one that God loves, even though they all do.

He said that blind people 'see' things while out-of-body that they couldn't possibly have seen while alive. He referred to, *Near-Death and Out-of-Body Experiences in the Blind: A Study of Apparent Eyeless Vision*, written by Kenneth Ring, Ph.D. and Sharon Cooper, M.A., University of Connecticut.

He said that about a quarter of NDEs are dark and hellish, but most find that God is love and that how we treat each other is the most important lesson.

**Dr. Karl Greene**, Neurosurgeon: Dr. Greene was a medical resident at the Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix in the early 1990's, studying under Dr. Robert Spetzler.

Dr. Greene and Dr. Spetzler alternately described the **Pamela Reynolds** case in detail and then she entered the video with her own description of her NDE. She had a brain aneurism that required emergency surgery. The surgery they performed was an

unusual operation called 'cardiac stand-still.' That required them to stop her heart (while maintaining her life with machines) and drain the blood from her head, rendering the brain non-functional while they operated. The operation was successful, and she quickly recovered. The next day, she described seeing things during her operation (out-of-body) that she could only have seen if she were 'alive' in the room.

**Ms. Reynolds** then described her out-of-body experience watching the operation in some detail. The video doesn't describe her NDE beyond that out-of-body experience. Her case is important in the NDE discussion because of her experience while being in 'cardiac stand-still' and her brain and eyes being entirely non-functional in terms of her 'seeing' what was going on in the room. For more information about Pamela Reynolds and her NDE, see Wikipedia.

**Dr. Mary Neal**, drowning victim NDE, Orthopedic spine surgeon, NY Times best-selling author of *To Heaven and Back: A Doctor's Extraordinary Account of Her Death, Heaven, Angels, and Life Again*, 2012

The following is from the description of her book on Amazon, not the video: *To Heaven and Back, is Mary's remarkable story of her life's spiritual journey and what happened as she moved from life to death to eternal life, and back again. Detailing her feelings and surroundings in heaven, her communication with angels, and her deep sense of sadness when she realized it wasn't her time, Mary shares the captivating experience of her modern-day miracle.*

*Mary's life has been forever changed by her newfound understanding of her purpose on earth, her awareness of God, her closer relationship with Jesus, and her personal spiritual journey suddenly enhanced by a first-hand experience in heaven. To Heaven and Back, will reacquaint you with the hope, wonder, and promise of heaven, while enriching you own faith and walk with God*.

In 1999, Dr. Neal and her husband were on a kayaking trip in Chile when she was forced to go straight over a waterfall and her kayak plunged into the pool below, getting stuck under 8-10 feet of water. After 30 minutes, the others in her group switched from rescue mode to body recovery. She then described her near-death experience in a lot of detail that you'll have to get from her book or the video.

**Steve Kang**, suicide victim, negative NDE: Steve Kang was born and raised in a Buddhist home in South Korea. He believed in heaven, hell and reincarnation. He was a social outcast and did a lot of drugs. He had a vision of an old Asian grandpa who promised him reduced time in hell if he committed suicide. He accepted the idea and then described his NDE.

The first part was dark and scary but then turned into a positive experience. Then he awoke in the hospital. After a few months of recovery, he was still in pain and depressed. His NDE changed his outlook to prioritize others, so he joined the Army Reserves and became a chaplain to counsel soldiers coming back from war with positive messages about hope and God's mercy.

**Paul Ojeda**, overdose victim, negative NDE

Mr. Ojeda was suffering from depression and overdosed. His near-death experience was also very dark and scary until he turned to God and asked for help.

## *Proof of Heaven*

*Proof of Heaven* is a book by a skeptical neurosurgeon, Eben Alexander, M.D., about his own near-death experience (NDE). He was otherwise heathy when he quickly contracted bacterial meningitis in his brain, suffered severe seizures and then went into a coma, functionally brain dead for seven days. They nearly took him off life support before he awoke. His recovery was literally miraculous; he would most likely have been in a vegetative state after all the brain damage from the bacteria but fully recovered after some time. He further states that, due to the brain damage he suffered, his brain could not have been the source of his NDE; it had to have happened in his consciousness, but outside of his physical body.

This particular book is notable for several reasons. It's written by a neurosurgeon who was totally scientific in his rejection and disbelief in NDE until he had one himself. He scientifically knew what the infection was and the severe medical impacts to understand just how miraculous his recovery was. His testimony to his profession and many colleagues has raised respect and understanding of NDE around the world. Put all that together and it's a real testament to the reality of life after death.

Like any controversial book, there are many critics including other doctors and scientists that refute the claims by the author in this book. That's also true of most claims and other books regarding near-death experiences. I'm trying to look critically at the evidence, together with other resources, and it further reinforces my understanding of life after death.

The author, being a scientific skeptic himself, was moved to study the phenomenon of NDE and read more than 150 books about it. There are, indeed, a lot of resources available that substantiate the reality of NDE. The author referred to the Bigelow Institute of Consciousness Studies competition, which ***established beyond a reasonable doubt, the proof for the survival of human consciousness after permanent bodily death.*** (my emphasis) https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/index.php/bics-afterlife-proof/

Before his NDE, the author believed, as a doctor and scientist, that all consciousness was only possible within a living brain and was lost when the brain died. His NDE convinced him that a world of consciousness exists completely free of a functioning brain, and that consciousness of a spiritual nature survives after death of the body.

The author described his experience of a spiritual world while being brain-dead. He says that he had no self-identity at all during that experience which, he believes, allowed him to see and experience insights of that spiritual world that wouldn't have been possible if he had a self-identity. He was also in that state of consciousness for seven days which allowed a more extensive experience than most short-term NDE otherwise documented.

After his NDE, his son encouraged him to write it all down. As he did, similar to other NDE writers, he said that its reality exceeds our abilities to describe it adequately in words. Our communication is limited to words and his NDE went far beyond what words can describe. Due to copyright limitations, I can only use small bites of his extensive description and my own limited words to convey his message.

His experience began in a negative manner; a visible, transparent but bleary darkness; grotesque beings; strange noises; sickening smells.

Then, it all changed. A white golden light, the most beautiful music. He immediately went through the light into the most beautiful world and was joined by a beautiful girl, he assumed to be an angel, who accompanied him on his journey. Without using words, she spoke to him with genuine and pure love.

Chapter 9 is the most complete description of his experience in heaven (he never called it heaven but again, a word to describe something we just can't fully understand in this life on earth). Beauty and sound all merged into one existence that was inherently felt. When he wordlessly thought – "where am I" – the answer came immediately yet wordlessly, in light, love and beauty. All thoughts were immediate and complete so he could understand concepts that he would not have been able to grasp on earth. He was literally conversing with God, of whom he used the pronoun, 'Om.'

*Om told me that there is not one universe by many, and that* ***love lay at the center of them all.*** *Evil was present in all the other universes as well, but only in the tiniest trace amounts.* ***Evil was necessary because without it, free will was impossible, and without free will, there could be no growth – no forward movement, no chance for us to become what God longed for us to be.*** (a statement I completely agree with)

He learned that he could move about in that world simply by thinking about it. (I also agree with that concept)

Knowledge about the nature and structure of the universe was conveyed to him directly and was stored in his memory instantly. He remembers it all, but back in life on earth, he still has to process it through his limited brain and express it in limited, human words. One of the truths he learned that it was impossible to know and understand the vast physical and spiritual worlds and many more universes that exist or have ever existed; it's beyond our comprehension.

The most important lesson he learned was that it's all based on love. ***Love is, without a doubt, the basis for everything.*** *Not some abstract, hard-to-fathom kind of love but the day-to-day kind that everyone knows --- In its purest and most powerful form,* ***this love is not jealous or selfish, but unconditional. This is the reality of realities, the incomprehensibly glorious truth of truths that lives and breathes at the core of everything that exists or that ever will exist*** ---. (my emphasis and the point of this book)

We all have loved ones in the spiritual realm that help us navigate life on earth. We are all deeply known and loved by God. None of us are beyond God's love.

We are part of those many different worlds because we all are under one divine reality, God. We are spiritual beings in a physical world, and we are destined to become fully spiritual beings. Our thoughts are spiritual in nature, more than just brain functions; they are before and above physical processes.

As he was about to return to life in his body, he was no longer able to access the fulness of the spiritual world and became very sad. Then he realized that all those spirits around him were praying for him and their prayers gave him energy and confidence that he would be all right, that he would be taken care of. He was not alone.

His initial recovery was immediate upon waking from his coma, but of course, his complete recovery took a long time. He awoke and in short order was able to speak relatively normally with his family and doctors. It truly was a miraculous recovery. His first words were, *"All is well."*

His mental recovery was not immediate though. He had strange dreams, nightmares and fantasies, normal for patients whose brains are coming back online after

being inactive for a long period. His language, memories and knowledge returned slowly. His NDE gave him the knowledge of who he really was and of how the world really works.

He was eager to share his new-found knowledge with his colleagues and peers, but it turned out, they weren't as interested in accepting it. But he understood that he would not have accepted it himself – before.

He came home a week later. His son advised him to pause on other distractions and write down clearly all of his memories of the NDE before it got mixed with other ideas about it. He got up at 2 or 2:30am for the next six weeks and wrote. He tried to write down every detail of his experience, and the many lessons he had learned. It was still very real, and he wanted to capture it all.

The author became much more interested in other people's NDE in comparison to his own. He studied NDE literature that he would previously have rejected. He was now in a unique position as a scientist with his own experience to build upon. He knew some people would understand and accept it, some would reject it no matter what he said, but he wanted to reach those who would be open to it while being told by the scientists that it wasn't possible.

As a doctor and scientist, he considered all other possible explanations for his experience and concluded that none were possible, mostly because his brain was totally non-functional at the time of his experiences. What he experienced required a highly functional brain at the same time his own brain was not functioning. Medically speaking, that was not possible.

In Chapter 33, the author writes in detail what he now believes about 'consciousness' from what he learned during his NDE. Consciousness is not a physical process as he had believed before his NDE, but it's at the core of reality. (see chapter on **Consciousness**)

### Life after death is real

The above resources strongly demonstrate that life after death is very real. As Dr. Sabom said, enough evidence would lead most people to agree. (***After Death***)

The Catholic Church has many other resources regarding life after death, some of which I have studied and are included in this book. The Church's teaching and most other conservative Protestant faiths is that life after death is entirely based on our personal relationship with Jesus Christ, Lord of all creation and our personal savior, a very exclusive theology.

The explicit teaching of the Church is from the *Catechism*, CCC 1215, regarding the necessity of Christian Baptism: --- *without which no one "can enter the Kingdom of God*." 1257 says, *"The Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation. --- **The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude**, ---"* And, *"Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."* John 3:5 (my emphasis)

I understand that is Jesus' explicit teaching, and hence the Church's restrictive teaching, that the pathway to heaven is narrow and the road to hell is wide. If true, that

implies two things: that few people meet the narrow requirements for salvation as defined by Church teaching and that many otherwise good people may go to hell.

That kind of teaching leaves out all people that preceded Christ for several hundred thousand years. It excludes all people from all times, all over the world who believe in other faiths, or with no particular faith at all, and certainly all atheists. Does that mean, literally that they are all condemned to hell with no further opportunity after death? No hope for their salvation? Nothing can save them?

Interestingly, at an ecumenical conference, *the "Interreligious Meeting with Young People" in Singapore (September 2024), the Holy Father highlighted the importance of interfaith dialogue and the pursuit of peace,* ***emphasizing that different religions can lead individuals to God.*** (my emphasis)
https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/pope-francis-all-religions-are-paths-to-god/ar-AA1sCwpx

Pope Francis: *One of the things that has impressed me most about the young people here is your capacity for interfaith dialogue. This is very important because if you start arguing, "My religion is more important than yours...," or "Mine is the true one, yours is not true....," where does this lead? Somebody answer. [A young person answers, "Destruction".] That is correct.* ***All religions are paths to God. I will use an analogy: they are like different languages that express the divine. But God is for everyone, and therefore, we are all God's children.*** *"But my God is more important than yours!". Is this true?* ***There is only one God, and religions are like languages, paths to reach God. Some Sikh, some Muslim, some Hindu, some Christian. Understood?*** *Yet, interfaith dialogue among young people takes courage. The age of youth is the age of courage, but you can misuse this courage to do things that will not help you. Instead, you should have courage to move forward and to dialogue.* (my emphasis)
https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/september/documents/20240913-singapore-giovani.html

It is my opinion that no 'good' person goes to hell because I believe that God, the ultimate judge, is unlimited love, mercy and justice. It would be contradictory to believe that a loving and merciful God would eternally condemn a good person just because they didn't follow all the rules of conduct according to the Catholic Church. There has to be a better answer.

If a good person doesn't go to hell and is not yet ready for heaven by the Church's definition, they must first go through a cleansing time and process in purgatory. To me, that means purgatory has to be open to and accepting of all 'good' people, regardless of their prior disposition relative to Christian baptism.

Conversely, I believe that only evil people are condemned to hell (they literally condemn themselves by their choices). Purgatory's lowest levels are for truly bad people, but they still aren't eternally condemned. They may suffer for a long time for

the things they have done but could eventually still be on their way to heaven. See more about purgatory below.

CAUTION AGAIN: If I'm wrong about the above statements and the conservative viewpoints are literally true, many good people may be in jeopardy of losing their souls after death because they didn't follow all the strict rules.

Life after death is very real but what's it like? The above resources about near-death experiences provide a wide range of descriptions. Later chapters include my descriptions from other resources and my own thinking.

First of all, it's really 'us' individually and personally in our own identity with all of our senses, memories, knowledge and personality. It's the next phase of our continuing life, just without the confinements of our bodies. It's not material in any way, yet it co-exists with the material world, and some may be able to still experience it.

Because we each experience it individually, we each have a unique perception of that reality. The reality is what we each perceive and that may be different from what others perceive because there is no material environment; it's all spiritual in nature and is unlimited.

I question, but don't yet know things like, what is our 'age' in life after death? The age that we died? Infants, children, teens, young adults, middle aged, old? Does an infant have the same experience as an old person? It seems that our spiritual 'bodies' are mature, perfected and 'look' like our earthly selves, yet without disabilities and imperfections. But how do infants, et al, age after death into 'mature' nature? I don't know but it seems that they do somehow, as they gain experience and knowledge, they may gain maturity.

**Life after death is diverse**

I want to make another important point about the nature of life after death, whether in heaven, purgatory or hell. **They are not a monoculture.** We each have our own concept of what life after death is like and we express it in terms we are familiar and comfortable with. Each religion and culture express it in their own terms. But we each tend to think that we've got the only right vision of it, so we think of it as a monoculture of our own understanding – everyone else coming to exist in our version of the afterlife.

The literal, conservative teaching of the Church is that the Bible and the Church's teaching are absolutely true, and that only Christians can enjoy God's eternal life in heaven. It almost seems the Church's vision of heaven is God the Father, Jesus Christ the glorified Son, and the Holy Spirit, holy Mary, all the angels and saints, in a setting like High Mass, all praising God for eternity. For some Catholics, that may very well be true. And anyone who wants to go to heaven has to join them in that Holy Mass.

That viewpoint is an exclusive monoculture of Christians regardless of what time in history or national culture they came from. I don't believe that to be true. I believe

that life after death more closely fits the culture in which we each lived in this life– what's most fitting for their pathway to heaven and eternal life.

My point is that life here on earth and after death is very diverse, encompassing all cultures throughout history and around the world, coexisting in a vast spiritual nature. We experience it in terms of our own spiritual life so it's more likely after death that we'll be in a similar culture to our earthly life, our own version of life after death. But that same concept applies to people of all the other cultures around the world and throughout time.

And the higher up the stairway to heaven, the more freedom one will have to experience that diversity; conversely, the lower levels on the stairway have less freedom of choice and experience.

(see ***What dreams may come*** below for another vision of life after death)

## Reincarnation

The word reincarnation derives from a Latin term that literally means 'entering the flesh again'. Philosophically, it's the concept that a deceased soul who had a previous life with related knowledge and memories is reincarnated in the body of a new human being. This concept is supported in some religions and cultures, but not the Christian religion.

I'm not going far into this other than to acknowledge the concept and provide some comments. Please see the internet for more information.

But what is significant is that there have been around 2500 reports of children's past-life memories that have been studied. The most notable one was a boy named Ryan Hammons. This case was studied by Jim Tucker, professor of psychiatry and neurobehavioral science at the University of Virginia. Professor Tucker was able to verify 55 statements by Ryan of his previous life. (see more on the internet)

I've read about some of those studies and have no reason to believe that they are false or fabricated. If they are true, it opens the understanding of life after death to new ideas not generally accepted.

## Judgment

Throughout your life, your (sub-conscious) conscience records your every moral action and choice for subsequent judgment after your death. Up to the point of death, you can still change what is in your conscience, but its contents are locked in and cannot be changed after death. You can no longer affect or change your impending judgment.

Death of your body releases your soul. Persons having near-death experiences commonly recall having their lives flashed before their consciousness. I don't know how long that lasts but it seems to be relatively short, perhaps instantly, yet comprehensively. That prepares your soul for judgment as you will completely understand your own

spiritual nature, your conscience. And that provides the basis for the next journey of your life.

Your judgment will also reflect other measures in your life, e.g., love, good works, suffering, the graces that God and others have given you, etc. They will mitigate some of the consequences and improve your spiritual status. If you have suffered a lot in this life, that may offset some or all the suffering after death due to your offensive life choices. It seems that God's justice would not make you suffer more than enough to offset the wrongs in your life. That would be unjust.

The final measure of judgment is how much love do you, at the time of your death, have for God and others. Great love will be rewarded with a short, quick journey to heaven; inadequate love will need to be perfected before you can complete your journey. How long that will take depends on your judgment.

We are generally taught that God will be your judge. In ***Get Us Out Of Here!!*** (see that chapter below), departed souls told Maria Simma that you will be your own judge based on the above review of your own life, knowing the appropriate consequences and understanding what more you need to do before entering heaven.

That presumes that you are destined for heaven; it won't work that way if you're destined for hell. It seems that those destined for hell don't understand that what they've been doing is wrong and can't accept the consequences. Their conscience failed them in life and now it's time for accountability.

**Heaven and hell, with purgatory in between**

Originally, God's spiritual world for himself and the angels was perfectly full of love, truly heaven. But Lucifer's rebellion destroyed that singular loving nature and literally formed a new spiritual nature we know as hell where he became its ruler – Satan himself. Since then, both heaven and hell co-exist as two separate supernatural dimensions.

The big picture is that God and heaven exist in a spiritual world of love and satisfaction while Satan and hell exist in a spiritual world of hate and despair – total opposites. To complete the picture, that spiritual world includes a middle world or dimension between heaven and hell, that is – purgatory. And the reality of that is what life after death is all about, the whole purpose for this book.

We live in that spiritual world right now, between heaven and hell, similar to purgatory, but our problem in trying to believe in and understand this reality is that it's entirely spiritual and we can't experience it directly with our physical senses – sight, hearing, touch. But we can experience it through our intellect when we observe the effects of good and bad, love and suffering. Our own free will exists in that spiritual world with some effects of both heaven and hell when we choose between good and bad. Love and all the good things in life reflect heaven; hate, violence and the many bad

things in life reflect hell; normal life reflects purgatory, in between heaven and hell with some degree of both.

We tend to think of the spiritual world as three different physical or geographical places such as in the sky or space or under the surface toward the center of the earth. That's not the way I think about them. They are more like the air around us with no defined space or borders. You don't 'go' to any of them; you're already there. It's more like you 'become' the place you're destined to be rather than another place you're going to. So, when we think about 'going' from purgatory to heaven, it's not like we're changing places because there's no border between them. Instead, when we 'go' from purgatory to heaven, it's just that our soul is becoming more holy, saintly and worthy of being in God's presence.

Similarly, heaven and hell are 'places' but not limited to one single, physical place relative to earth although some places on earth may seem like paradise or hell depending on the environment. Hawaii is my idea of heaven, but other places may be for other people. And right now, part of Ukraine and Gaza are a living hell unleashed by Satan himself. When we experience the fullness of God's presence here in this life, we're in heaven; when we experience hate, violence, despair and guilt, we're in hell. Every departed soul is 'somewhere' in a single 'place' in the spiritual world and not everywhere, as God is, and that 'place' is determined by how they've lived their life in this world. It's a spiritual dimension, not a physical one.

Purgatory is between heaven and hell and has three levels: one closer to heaven, one closer to hell, and one broadly between, again without physical location or border between them. As mentioned above, they are just different dimensions of spiritual nature. I think of purgatory as the stairway between heaven and hell, and departed souls are somewhere on that stairway. Their relative position is determined by their love – love of God and love of others. I believe that the real love in your soul is the measure of the distance between yourself and God who is total love – the more love, the closer you are to God and vice versa. In heaven, the distance from God is zero; in hell, the distance from God is infinite. We can choose a level of love for ourselves; God doesn't force us to any level or place us there as a matter of judgment. It is more like self-justice; we are where we belong based on our love and life choices.

So, when we think about how long we may spend in purgatory before 'going' to heaven, it's more a matter of the state of our love of God and the choices we make here on earth before we die. Purgatory is the state of being where we must improve our love for God in order to move toward heaven. If we don't improve our love, we won't move forward, and that's a choice we have to make. It is improved by accepting God's love and sharing love with others, as well as the love we receive from others.

## Natural laws

Before God began the process of creating the physical cosmos, he established all the laws of nature as the plan and framework for every part and factor in his created world. Every created element was to be controlled by God's natural laws. Natural laws are constantly present and working throughout the cosmos including here on earth. In the sense that nature is an element of God, all of creation is continually governed and supported by God. So literally, when we see nature at work in the world around us, we are seeing God's work in progress. And it is miraculous! **Natural laws are objective reality at its highest level – again, nature can only tell the truth**.

Without natural laws, the physical cosmos and the earth wouldn't and couldn't exist; there could only have been chaos. The fact that there is a universal natural order to everything is a testament to its creation by a powerful, knowing and loving God. Seeing how the world works in all its wonders should open the eyes and minds of non-believers.

*Natural laws are:*

- *Based upon Principles and Truth (Inherent to Creation)*
- *Harmonized with, due to Knowledge and Understanding*
- *Universal; exists and applies anywhere in the Universe regardless of location*
- *Eternal and Immutable; exists and applies for as long as the Universe exists, and cannot be changed* (https://www.abdabrs.com/natural-law.html)

A broad range of natural laws are expressed with reality-based laws in the physical sciences such as physics, chemistry, astronomy, etc., all dealing with the material, inanimate creation from the stars and galaxies, planets and moons, including all matter here on earth. For example, natural laws govern light, gravity, motion, energy, atomic nature, physical/chemical elements, etc. and are typically expressed mathematically.

Another natural law is the preservation of matter, that is, all the matter within our earth and its surrounding aerial environment is contained and cannot be eliminated; it can change form in many ways but will exist for eternity (or until the earth itself is destroyed and even then, it would be just dispersed into space). More matter can be added via meteors and asteroids impacting earth, but no matter can escape our environment (except through space exploration).

We and all other living beings that ever existed are entirely made up of natural elements that have been here on earth since before its 'creation' or from those impacting meteors/asteroids. All the physical matter in our bodies is truly billions of years old, just being reused by us. And as we acknowledge on Ash Wednesday, '*remember man that thou art dust and unto dust thou shall return*' to be recycled again into something new and different.

Natural laws that govern life itself existed in the intellectual being of God before the first forms of life on earth. When I think of 'natural laws of life', I think in terms of

the sciences concerned with living organisms, including biology, botany, zoology, physiology, bio-chemistry and related subjects.

The first natural law of life is that all life can only come from existing life, i.e., biogenesis – it can't come from inert matter. Historically, some have believed in autogenesis or spontaneous generation where life itself could have somehow been autonomously, physically initiated from non-living matter in some unknown event (with no God as creator). There is still some speculation about life-forming conditions such as thermal vents on the ocean floor that could lead to spontaneous generation. I read somewhere that it might have been a lightning strike that provided the first 'spark' of life. I continue to see articles in the online media that hypothesize a new theory about life beginning in hot springs or certain lakes, still trying to substantiate that autogenesis theory.

But, according to Wikipedia: *Rejection of spontaneous generation is no longer controversial among biologists. By the middle of the 19th century, experiments by Louis Pasteur and others were considered to have disproven the traditional theory of spontaneous generation and supported biogenesis.* Biogenesis is the scientific term for the reproduction of life from life, my above stated 'natural law of life'. In other words, life can only be reproduced by previously existing life, not through newly created life from non-living matter.

Also, from a scientific standpoint, autogenesis is impossible in nature. Nothing inert (natural elements) can create life. There would have to have been some external, knowing and powerful cause to create a complex living being, i.e., with DNA, growth/life cycle, reproduction, etc. If it could, we would have real evidence, and it would still be happening – a natural process itself. Instead, it's just a theory with no evidence, in opposition to the existence of God, the real creator. The scientific evidence, if you accept it, supports creation by God.

We have very little real evidence of the very earliest life forms. We only have limited fossilized evidence and that could only have come from life forms with complex physical structures which were probably much later in the evolution of life. The earliest life forms were probably single cell or simple, non-structural life forms such as bacteria, viruses, etc., that could not leave fossils. And likely, most early life forms just disintegrated into natural elements after they died, leaving no evidence, especially lasting billions of years. As those earliest life forms died, they just became part of the natural environment to be used again for subsequent life forms.

A related natural law of life is that every life form must be able to somehow physically reproduce itself. No reproduction and the life form would go extinct. Life continues to exist only through its own reproduction. That is the fundamental basis for all sexual drive – the natural requirement to reproduce the species. And because life itself is endangered by all kinds of enemies and events that can kill it, the natural sexual drive is necessarily strong and compelling. We wouldn't exist without it.

To lay a basis for later discussion about the morality of sex, one must understand that the necessity for it is profoundly based in the nature of all of living beings: plants, insects, every kind of animal, and humans. It's so embedded in our nature that it underlies many of our conscious and subconscious actions. It's the fundamental basis for our natural attraction to the opposite sex or for LGBTQI+ people to whomever is attractive to them.

In plants, the fundamental reason for beautiful blossoms and flowers is to attract insects and birds to carry out the plant's sexual process of pollination necessary for their reproduction. In birds, it's displayed in beautiful songs and plumage, all to attract mates. In large animals, it drives the males to fights of courage and strength to dominate their opponents in order to win the rights to the females. And so on.

In humans, it's the fundamental basis for our entire beauty and fashion industries, to make people attractive to potential partners. It's a significant part of the basis for beauty pageants and body-building. It affects how we take care of ourselves and how we present ourselves to others. It's a major driver in regular entertainment and the primary focus of the sexual entertainment industry. And from the commercial sectors, 'sex sells' and is used extensively through advertisements of all kinds.

It's so fundamental and necessary that our natural instinct for sexual satisfaction drives us toward sexual activity from the earliest stages of our lives. In the past, I recall an observation online that a fetus seemed to be masturbating. Young children unconsciously masturbate because it gives them a real and immediate physical pleasure. It really kicks in with puberty when we develop mature sexuality. It partially drives how we socialize and becomes stronger when we start dating. It's entirely and necessarily natural, all the way through completion of sexual contact, all because of the basic, natural need for reproduction of the species. And God created it all with his knowledge, power and will. (see **God-given (revealed) moral laws** later below)

It drives us to find and connect with a partner, for a short time or a lifetime. It's fundamental to marriage and family life. To faithful religious couples, it's a sacramental bond the makes them one. It's a beautiful thing and most pleasurable in the proper circumstances.

But the strong sexual drive can also be very harmful. The list of sexual sin and crime is long and distressing. Infidelity and adultery destroy good marriages. Sexual abuse of children, spouses and strangers is too common. Pornography is the far end of open sexual media, e.g., Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue to Playboy and more that go far beyond that. Prostitution, sexual exploitation and trafficking of many young girls and women all over the world by criminal organizations is largely uncontrolled. Sexual violence and murder is central to many true crime books, movies and TV programs. It is on the evening news much of the time. It's a sad, bad part of our society.

The natural laws of life govern reproduction, genetics, cellular processes, life cycles, etc. They apply to all kinds of plant and animal life from the tiniest to the largest.

Every species has its own natural characteristics and processes that govern their life cycle from conception to death, all governed by these natural laws. That pattern or code for all life is contained genetically in the DNA of every cell of every form of life. That, in itself, is truly a miracle and evidence of the intelligence and power of our creator.

Think of it, over 3 billion pairs of genetic code that entirely and uniquely define each and every person who has ever lived inside every cell of their human body, both while living and in the remains of the deceased. And they all are contained in something microscopic in size. Incredible! Literally miraculous!

That DNA code controls the development and function of every living cell, each to do its own part in the life of its complete being – plant, animal or human. For example, there are about 200 different types of cells in the human body (not including those in our gut) and around 30 trillion cells in total. Every one of those cells contains a DNA code and follows its instructions throughout its own short life, giving way via reproduction to the cells that succeed it.

Further, every physical feature of each living being is an expression of its genetic code, e.g., in humans – the size and shape of the body, their sex, color of hair, eyes and skin, etc. But that only describes the exterior; think of all the interior components – organs, tissue, nerves, etc. that get their size and function from that code. And of course, our entire brain and all its functions and capabilities are determined by the code we received at the moment of our conception.

Another 'natural law of life' is the entire life cycle of every living being from conception as a single cell zygote through growth to an infant to pubescent teenager to mature adult to old person to death. That entire process is natural and the pattern for its development and control throughout its life is contained in that microscopic DNA code. Every living being has its own life cycle from conception to death.

And still another 'natural law of life' is that all life requires several forms of nourishment in order to continue to live – food, water, air, light, heat, etc. Remove any of the required nourishment and the being dies. There are many forms of life that live in many different environments with more or less of these required nourishments but the principle still applies to all. Only with the proper nourishment, a living being can successfully carry out its life cycle.

Per Darwin's, *The Origin of Species*, every life form not only functions to <u>maintain</u> its own life (a natural law itself) but also is compelled by nature to <u>improve</u> its living conditions for its own well-being and the well-being of its offspring. According to his theory, that's the driver for evolution. Seeking a better environment and food for itself is 'natural' and necessary. Life naturally improves itself to the extent possible. Darwin cites many examples of various animals physically adapting to their sources of nourishment as well as their environment as the driver of their self-improvement, i.e., evolution. And as the best of each species adapted to their environment and survival,

they somehow developed that adaptation into their genetic code and passed it along to their offspring.

(original draft) I have a problem with that theory. The genetics that each parent passes on to its offspring are formed in the egg and sperm within their reproductive glands. I don't see how a physical adaptation by an adult can actually be transferred to its existing DNA and then passed on to its offspring.

(I stand corrected) While studying the genetic aspect of our soul, I read that scientists trained adult mice in certain ways that modified their behavior which were subsequently passed on genetically to their next generations. It means that, in the physical evolution of animals (including humans), new behaviors or lifestyles can and do somehow alter the genetics of the adult which can then be passed on genetically. It seems that modification would be in the genetic map for their brain which would affect the initial brains in their offspring. That changes my whole understanding that will be reflected as I continue to edit this work.

I believe that God was somehow involved in that process of evolution rather than being a fully natural process as Darwin theorizes. (See my theories about creation later below)

Another interesting natural element of living organisms that have some kind of brain is **instinct** that governs many of their natural processes and responses and some level of communication. That instinct is part of the process of self-preservation, reproduction and self-improvement. And the animals with higher brain levels include some level of intelligence and emotions. All of these are still processes governed by the natural laws of life.

Mankind is governed by the same above natural laws of physical matter and life but, because we have a mind, intellect and free will, we need additional kinds of life sciences, e.g. *psychology to address behavior and mental health issues, and sociology to address social behavior and aspects of culture associated with everyday life*. (Wikipedia)

But amazing as it is, life is still a created being and is not perfect. Many things can and do go wrong. In fact, it's fatal flaws that ultimately control our outcome. Because it's so tiny and complex, DNA can be damaged or contain mistakes. The environment we live in can harm us. The things we ingest can make us sick. Accidents happen. Storms, floods, earthquakes and fires destroy everything in their path. Every living thing faces challenges that threaten damage or destruction to its existence. All of those are also part of the natural world and, although perhaps randomly impacting life, are following their own natural laws.

Another 'natural law' not directly expressed above is **death** (as described above). It is absolute that every single living thing of any kind is mortal and will die at some point – no exceptions. Many, many species are entirely extinct, having gone from large populations to zero. Many species alive today may be extinct in the foreseeable future.

Some may last until the 'end of time,' but they will all die at some point, individually and collectively. Life in one form or another has already existed for billions of years and presumably will for billions more, but every individual life has only a relatively short lifetime before it must die.

As I write this, new publications pop up that need to be reviewed and incorporated, such as the following:

*Scientists propose sweeping new law of nature, expanding on evolution*
Story by Will Dunham, Reuters, October 16, 2023
(see bibliography for a link to this and other related articles for the complete narrative; the following is my summary)

This new 'natural law' is titled the ***"law of increasing functional information."*** It holds that all complex natural systems, both biological and non-biological (elements and compounds), including the cosmos in space, evolve to states of greater patterning, diversity and complexity. Evolution occurs when these various configurations are subject to selection for useful functions. (similar to Darwin's theory)

*"We see evolution as a universal process that applies to numerous systems, both living and nonliving, that increase in diversity and patterning through time,"* said Carnegie Institution for Science mineralogist and astrobiologist Robert Hazen, a co-author of the scientific paper describing the law in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

*The authors proposed three universal concepts of selection: the basic ability to endure; the enduring nature of active processes that may enable evolution; and the emergence of novel characteristics as an adaptation to an environment.*

A related article is: *The "missing law" of nature was here all along*
by Rae Hodge, Salon, October 22, 2023 (see Bibliography)

Lots of good scientific explanations there. Of course, this process is entirely 'natural' in that it occurs with no external being or cause, i.e., God. The theory is that nature alone is the cause of this evolution. This new 'natural law' just refines Darwin's theories to a more modern understanding of evolution but still denies the existence of God as creator.

The scientific community does not recognize or accept the reality of God as designing, creating and modifying the cosmos, earth and all its elements, including life and mankind. They must continue to study how it all came about naturally while avoiding any acceptance of God.

But they also avoid answers to the biggest questions that can only be explained by the role of God in it all. What 'caused' the 'Big Bang'? What caused the subsequent processes of stars dying and 'creating' heavier elements with such precision and characteristics, e.g. the physics of nuclear processes? What caused the reality of gravity in forming the stars, planets and moons and all the other physical bodies in space?

Once the earth was somehow formed and all the elements necessary to support life were established, how did that first transformation from inert elements happen to form living cellular beings (bacteria, viruses, or whatever earliest and simplest life forms) with built-in DNA code and the ability to reproduce themselves?

Another concept that I consider a natural law is **diversity**. God created a vast and complex cosmos and within it, an extraordinary diversity of matter and life. We sometimes describe diversity as being a 'bell curve' with the idea that the majority of 'things' exist in the middle of the curve while the most extreme 'things' exist at either end of the curve or spectrum. That applies to physical diversity in humans as well as diversity of mind. That principle applies through God's creative intention and will. On the physical side, it includes a wide variation of sexual nature, including intersex people with physical characteristics of both male and female. It also includes a wide range of sexual identities. Put together with our free will, it is completely natural that we have a wide range of LGBTQI+, et al, individuals.

Diversity of the human mind along with free will also allows for the full range of morality from the most saintly to the most evil. Most people are somewhere in the middle of the curve with minorities of extraordinary good and evil at opposite ends. That aligns with heaven and hell in life after death with purgatory in between for those in the middle, not yet ready for heaven but not bad enough for hell.

Another concept we don't typically think of as a natural law is **time**. But not in the sense of minutes and hours, days, years, centuries, etc., but in the sense that everything is in a succession of past, present and future. What has already happened, what is happening right now, and what has not yet happened. In our consciousness, we may know about the past, and we experience the present, but we cannot really know what will happen in the future. Because many things follow natural laws, we can project what they will do in the future, but even knowing what will happen does not equate to its having happened. We cannot experience what hasn't happened yet. That concept will come back when I discuss the human soul.

### Science is the study of God's natural laws

Science studies natural phenomena and documents the objective truth about every element of physical matter and life throughout the cosmos and here on earth. In a sense, science is a theology because it's literally the study of all of God's creation. While scientists don't attribute their findings to a supernatural being, i.e., God, they enlighten us with definitively certain knowledge about the creator's plans and methods. They tell us how God works as well as how to utilize, modify or enhance natural elements and processes for medical, industrial, or other beneficial uses.

Generally, science and religion are consistent, but we have problems when they seem to be in contradiction. To me, science is the objective truth while religion is largely intersubjective, with some parts based on myths rather than truth. Science misses the

complete picture when it denies things it cannot see or measure while religion misses the complete picture when it denies scientific reality. The best knowledge is from the truths of each in their own proper perspective.

The resolution of conflict should be in divine revelation where God himself tells us the truth. Science can't tell us entirely about the existence and nature of God because they limit their studies and statements to physical reality, not spiritual reality, so we need revelation to explain how God and the spiritual nature works. I've written above about my concerns with revelation according to the Church when it's in conflict with scientific truths such as creation of the cosmos in contrast with Genesis's description. Most of my writing sides with science for the objective truth. See above regarding my thoughts on **Truth** and **Knowledge, revelation and inspiration**, and below for more discussion about creation.

The rationale of atheists is that all existence is only explained by nature and natural processes, some even holding that nature itself is eternal in order to avoid the argument of how nature itself came to be. To me, nature proves the existence, knowledge and power of God, not replacing or displacing the reality of God. Nature is an extension or dimension of God.

## Natural moral laws

Once we start to address human behavior, we need to have a basis for moral values, distinguishing between good and bad thoughts, words, and actions. Some of that natural moral guidance is part of our God-given nature and some of it is given by our historical social culture.

***Natural law*** *is a theory in ethics and philosophy that says that human beings possess* ***intrinsic values*** *that govern our reasoning and behavior. Natural law maintains that these rules of right and wrong* ***are inherent in people and are not created by society or court judges***. (Wikipedia, my emphasis)

I think that natural moral laws are comparable to our natural physical instincts. We, and all animals, are created with natural instincts embedded in our DNA that provide basic guidance to our essential bodily functions. That's what enables a newborn to suckle or eat and drink immediately after birth or exit from their shell. It guides salmon and wild birds on annual migrations. It helps predators find food and their prey to find refuge. It's such an essential part of all living beings that we totally take it for granted; it's just there, embedded in our nature.

In humans, those fundamental intrinsic moral values are likewise embedded in our nature from conception. And they are entirely subconscious; we don't have to think or will them, they just are there inside us. But they are also not black and white; and they vary a little or a lot from one person to another, from one society or culture to another.

Given personal free will to choose our own moral values and the extremely wide range of personalities of billions of individuals over the millennia, any and every

possible combination of values ranging from the most holy to the most evil exists. Without putting a moral value on sexuality, for the same reason, every possible form of sexual identity is possible and will exist at some level.

See later for discussion about our soul but, at this point, understand this concept of intrinsic values as our **conscience**. God created us with a conscience – a part of our human nature that understands the difference and consequences of good and bad and reinforces our natural resistance to evil.

*Conscience is a cognitive process that elicits emotional and rational associations based on an individual's moral philosophy or value system*. (see Wikipedia for a much more thorough discussion about conscience)

A good conscience reflects God-given values and leads to heaven. A bad conscience reflects Satan's values and leads to hell. And our conscience guides our choices under our free will.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) 1954-1960 includes a section on *The Natural Moral Law*. Just a few statements:

*Man participates in the wisdom and goodness of the Creator who gives him mastery over his acts and the ability to govern himself with a view to the true and the good.* ***The natural law expresses the original moral sense which enables man to discern by reason the good and the evil, the truth and the lie.*** (my emphasis)

*The natural law, present in the heart of each man and established by reason, is universal in its precepts and its authority extends to all men. It expresses the dignity of the person and determines the basis for his fundamental rights and duties.*

*Application of the natural law varies greatly; it --- takes account of various conditions of life according to places, times, and circumstances.*

*The natural law, the Creator's very good work, provides the solid foundation on which man can build the structure of moral rules to guide his choices.*

A common term for natural moral laws is **virtue**: *A virtue is a trait or quality that is deemed to be morally good and thus is valued as a foundation of principle and good moral being. In other words, it is a behavior that shows high moral standards: doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong. The opposite of virtue is vice.* (Wikipedia)

The **Seven Heavenly Virtues** are: temperance, justice, prudence, fortitude, faith, hope, and charity/love. Additional examples of virtues are compassion, respect, generosity, and gratitude/thankfulness. See Virtuesforlife.com for a list and description of 73 virtues.

An equally important virtue not listed above is humility although it's related to temperance and love. Humility is to humble oneself, to not take oneself too highly, to recognize one's proper relationship to God and others. Humility is the counter virtue to the sin of vainglory/pride listed below. Temperance is to restrain oneself from doing things to excess, e.g., limiting alcohol intake. Love is placing others before oneself.

The virtue of humility shows up in many Biblical lessons, both by the prophets and letters of the apostles, but especially in Christ's own words, e.g., *blessed are the poor in spirit*. (Beatitudes, Matthew 5:3)

The Catechism describes humility as: *The virtue by which a Christian acknowledges that God is the author of all good. Humility avoids inordinate ambition or pride and provides the foundation for turning to God in prayer.*

Also, empathy and sympathy are related virtues that show how we care for others. Empathy is one trying to understand the needs of others and sympathy is to care for those needs, especially if they are hurt, suffering or disadvantaged. Empathy is God's love reflecting through you to those whom you care for – you are doing God's work.

On the other hand, *How Trump just turned America into crime syndicate* by Thom Hartmann, Alternet, May 8, 2025, describes how our nation is being governed by people with no empathy and the harm that is being done.

Similarly, I read another article, *Christian nationalists decided empathy is a sin*, by Aja Romano, Vox.com, May 22, 2025, that may explain why the government is so lacking in empathy. Some influential conservative voices argue that the west has gone too far in empathetic policies and programs, even to the point that it's a sin. *Too much empathy for someone else can erode your own sense of self, leaving you codependent or open to emotional abuse and manipulation*. (see Bibliography for links to both articles)

That looks to me like Satan's work – flipping the script, making good things seem bad and bad things seem good. It's so pervasive, we no longer see the evil in it all.

On the flip side, we have the **Seven Cardinal Sins**: vainglory/pride, greed/covetousness, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth. They are just as much a fundamental part of our nature as virtues but are driven by Satan without whom we would not be as strongly attracted to sin as we are. Satan's rejection of God was the real 'original' sin and all mankind since is subject to his influence.

Jesus gave a more inclusive description of vice in Mark 7:20-23. *But what comes out of a person, that is what defiles. From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within, and they defile.*

While not necessarily considered a vice, **apathy** is an impediment to virtue. Apathy is: *a lack of feeling, emotion, interest, or concern about something. It is a state of indifference, or the suppression of emotions such as concern, excitement, motivation, or passion. An apathetic individual has an absence of interest in or concern about emotional, social, spiritual, philosophical, virtual, or physical life and the world.* (Wikipedia)

Apathy is a mental and spiritual weakness that keeps you from doing things for your own good, e.g., diet, exercise, stop smoking, etc. But more importantly, it keeps you from doing things for your own eternal salvation, e.g., prayer, church, etc. It keeps

you from even considering them or making any effort to improve your knowledge of God and life after death.

As such, apathy may be a tool of Satan that he uses to prevent you from taking any step toward God. He may not succeed in taking you to his domain in hell, but he'll do everything in his power to keep you from getting closer to God and eternal life in heaven.

That reminds me of the hypothetical question – are you ignorant or apathetic? Answer – I don't know, and I don't care. That's sometimes the answer when the subject of life after death comes up for discussion.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Most of the **virtues are about our behavior towards others** while the **Cardinal Sins are mostly about oneself**. Of course, we all have self-interest, which is normal and necessary, but you will have your own best interest fulfilled when what you do is not just selfish. Selfishness is not listed as a Cardinal Sin but should be – it certainly isn't a virtue. **The value that matters most is how we behave toward others.**

In my opinion, **Diversity, Equity and Inclusion** (DEI) are virtues as compared to the vices of discrimination, injustice and exclusion which seem to be traits of traditional/conservative ideology. It seems that the current revolt against 'wokeness' is really an effort to get back to those vices instead of making this world a better place. It seems white and moral supremacy are part of that movement.

In today's (2025) cultural environment, it also seems that honesty and truthfulness should be virtues we model as compared to lies and conspiracy theories (on both sides) that are so common. *Honesty or truthfulness is a facet of moral character that connotes positive and virtuous attributes such as integrity, truthfulness, straightforwardness (including straightforwardness of conduct: earnestness), along with the absence of lying, cheating, theft, etc. Honesty also involves being trustworthy, loyal, fair, and sincere.* (Wikipedia)

Another thought is that virtues are a kind of measure of how 'good' we are. A virtuous person is a good person and vice versa. It's that simple. Look at the list of virtues to see how you can become a 'better' person.

Natural moral laws are spiritual in nature, not physically just popping up in our brain, and they align us with God or Satan, heaven or hell. They are embedded in our human nature by our Creator. We are almost constantly influenced by the push-pull between good and evil; we have tendencies toward both. But they are entirely under control by our free will to choose one or the other, from one extreme good to another extreme evil or to anything in between.

Every human being that has ever lived, lives now, or will live in the future is unique and has their own version of these natural moral laws embedded in their nature with their own level of conscience toward good and evil. That makes our choices between good and evil subjective; we each see our own version of right and wrong.

Generally, they are intersubjective – believed to be true by many, but each person has their own unique version.

God's natural moral laws guide us to love and respect all people, especially the marginalized and those in need of care and compassion. But our free will also enables us to discriminate, hate and abuse others in violation of those laws. Religious freedom allows us to do that in the name of God, supposedly. People who do so believe in an autocratic and judgmental God instead of a loving and merciful God. You're free to choose which God you believe in.

**God-given (revealed) moral laws**

The above natural moral laws were the basis for human behavior from the first Homo sapiens for several hundreds of thousands of years until relatively modern 'religion' took hold in societies around the world over the last few thousand years. Subsequently, our moral framework is mostly based on the religion of our own choosing or national culture. For example:

Hinduism

*Hinduism is the world's oldest religion, according to many scholars, with roots and customs dating back more than 4,000 years. Today, with more than 1 billion followers, Hinduism is the third-largest religion worldwide, after Christianity and Islam. Roughly 94 percent of the world's Hindus live in India. Because the religion has no specific founder, it's difficult to trace its origins and history. Hinduism is unique in that it's not a single religion but a compilation of many traditions and philosophies: Hindus worship a number of different gods and minor deities, honor a range of symbols, respect several different holy books and celebrate with a wide variety of traditions, holidays and customs.*

https://www.history.com/topics/religion/hinduism

Judaism

*Judaism is one of the world's oldest religions, dating back nearly 4,000 years, and is considered to be the original Abrahamic faith (which includes Islam and Christianity). As a monotheistic faith, followers of Judaism believe in one God who revealed himself through ancient prophets, including Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Solomon and others. In addition to a number of sacred texts — the most important of which is the Torah — Jews believe that the Ten Commandments are holy laws handed down to Moses by God.*

https://www.history.com/topics/religion/judaism

Buddhism

*Buddhism is a faith that was founded by Siddhartha Gautama—also known as "the Buddha"—more than 2,500 years ago in India. With an estimated 500 million to one billion followers, scholars consider Buddhism one of the major world religions. As*

*a non-theistic faith with no god or deity to worship, some scholars describe Buddhism as a philosophy or a moral code rather than an organized religion.*
https://www.history.com/topics/religion/buddhism

Christianity

*Christianity is the most widely practiced religion in the world, with more than 2 billion followers. The Christian faith centers on beliefs regarding the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. While it started with a small group of adherents, many historians regard the spread and adoption of Christianity throughout the world as one of the most successful spiritual missions in human history.*
https://www.history.com/topics/religion/history-of-christianity

While the website doesn't directly say the year/age of Christianity, it obviously is around 2,000 years. Jesus Christ and his immediate followers were of Jewish faith (Judaism). Our Bible is a combination of both Judaism up to the time of Christ (Old Testament) and then of Christ's own life and that of his disciples (New Testament).

Islam

*Islam is the second-largest religion in the world after Christianity, with about 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide. As one of the three Abrahamic religions—the others being Judaism and Christianity—it too is a monotheistic faith that worships one god, called Allah.*

*The prophet Muhammad, sometimes spelled Mohammed or Mohammad, was born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, in A.D. 570. Muslims believe he was the final prophet sent by God to reveal their faith to mankind.*

*According to Islamic texts and tradition, an angel named Gabriel visited Muhammad in 610 while he was meditating in a cave. The angel ordered Muhammad to recite the words of Allah.*

*Muslims believe that Muhammad continued to receive revelations from Allah throughout the rest of his life.*

*Starting in about 613, Muhammad began preaching throughout Mecca the messages he received. He taught that there was no other god but Allah and that Muslims should devote their lives to this God.*
https://www.history.com/topics/religion/islam

I can only speak relative to my Catholic faith and its history relative to God-given, revealed morality. The significant point is that we modern humans largely base our moral codes on religion as attributed to God's revelation.

People of Jewish faith, Catholics and Protestants believe that God directly revealed the **Ten Commandments** to Moses as described in Exodus 20. They are objective, explicit instructions of moral law as compared to the implicit nature of the above natural moral laws that are infused within us. Do this and don't do that. They set a minimum framework for God's revealed laws and are interpreted in more detail to

include many other moral restrictions, depending on the religion. I think that most religions have a version of what they believe to be directly revealed laws from God.

The Bible is believed to be the revealed Word of God and the source for much of what we believe to be God's revealed moral laws. The Old Testament was then interpreted by the Jewish religious leaders to form the basis for their moral codes. The New Testament presents Jesus as the Son of God who revealed and interpreted God's moral laws throughout his ministry on earth. Jesus' teachings are literally taken to be definitive moral guidance, but he taught much of it in parables, partially hiding the message and leading to some interpretation.

The Catholic Church holds that it alone has the knowledge and authority to interpret God's revealed moral laws and has done so throughout its existence. It holds that God, through its Holy Spirit, will prevent the Church from making errors in matters of morals and faith. I have a problem with some of that, given the significant errors that history has shown. (see **Whose rules does God judge by?** below)

One of the most significant of these revealed moral laws is the Sixth Commandment – *Thou shall not commit adultery*. God created all animals, including humans, with a built-in natural law necessary for reproduction, and within it a strong drive of sexuality. Without that strong sexual drive, the birth rate of any species wouldn't exceed the death rate, and we wouldn't be here now. So, how do we reconcile a strong natural law (requiring sex for reproduction of our species) with an opposing God-given, revealed moral law (limiting sex)?

First, look at the 'Seven Cardinal Sins': vainglory/pride, greed/ covetousness, **lust**, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth. Several of them are also based on a natural law – self-fulfillment of different kinds of natural needs and desires. God created us with all those natural desires, but they become harmful, selfish desires when taken too far.

The Sixth Commandment doesn't say have no sex whatsoever but limits that natural desire to the appropriate persons and situations, and explicitly not with someone else's spouse. Our Judeo-Christian heritage has taken that to be literally binding – no sexual activity whatsoever with anyone other than within a valid bisexual marriage.

In my own 2016 book, *A Window Into My Soul*, I repeated that strict conservative viewpoint. I've since changed my mind and belief somewhat because it absolutely prohibits all LGBTQI+ sexual activity, period! They are strictly not allowed to express that natural sexual response under any circumstances. When challenged, the Church's reply is strict chastity or celibacy, simply no sex. That's unrealistic. I believe that the millions of people who don't fit under the strict Judeo-Christian restrictions about sex are also created by God and given the same rights and privileges that we enjoy, within some reasonable boundaries. But the boundaries are only established by religions. And the conservative Church has made it very clear that there are no exceptions to that rule.

Similarly, the United Methodist Church has recently broken apart (schism) or 'realigned' into two separate organizations – one more liberal with regard to acceptance

of LGBTQI+ individuals as well as moderately pro-choice on abortion and one more conservative that clearly does not accept LGBTQI+ or abortion. See an article by Robert Allan Hill published on MSNBC media, December 31, 2023 entitled: *The Bible verse proving anti-LGBTQ Methodists have not truly read the Bible.* (see Bibliography for link)

Pope Francis recently said that the Church welcomes LGBTQI+ people. At the recent (2023) World Youth Day conference in Portugal, they chanted with Pope Francis: "*Todos, Todos, Todos"* (Everyone, Everyone, Everyone). So, yes, the Church welcomes everyone, including LGBTQI+. But Pope Francis then clarified that every organization has rules, and 'everyone' must follow those rules if they want to participate in the Church. The rules are basically what I said above: no sex outside of legal bisexual marriage. No Gay sex. No Lesbian sex. No Bisexual or Trans or Queer sex. No Gay marriage (but maybe civil unions). No openly Gay sex for Church employees. No health care related services for trans children or adults in Catholic hospitals.

Another 'revealed' moral law also has to do with sexual identity. Conservatives (and the Church) rely on the statement in Genesis 1:27 – "*God created man in his image, in the divine image* ***he created him; male and female*** *he created them*." That is taken literally that there are only two legitimate sexual identities – male and female; strictly binary, only one or the other, no exceptions, period.

Those teachings are based on the Scriptures and 2,000-year-old theology and have been reaffirmed throughout the Church's history. They are 'tradition' that many hold sacred and not subject to otherwise consideration. They do not take into account current scientific knowledge about the reality of physical and psychological sexuality that is far more complex than simple binary male/female definitions, i.e., the whole spectrum of LGBTQI+.

Expanding that complexity is the natural reality (objective truth) of intersex beings in both the animal kingdom and in humans. I first came across this in Darwin's *The Origin of Species* where he talked about 'hermaphrodites' in the animal kingdom (he didn't address the human world). We now know that characteristic, intersex, also applies to humans having been born with a spectrum of physical sexual attributes of both male and female; far broader variations than the traditional (conservative) binary definition. A small yet significant segment of our human society, reported to be 1.7%, have intersex characteristics at birth. Don't take my word for it; look it up to verify if you wish.

A person being naturally born intersex is not a moral issue, either on their own or of their parents – it's entirely natural, whether a God-intended condition or a result of the natural reproductive and genetic processes created by God. The moral issue arises within the conservative religions about when/how they practice their varied sexuality. It seems the real moral issue is not '<u>being</u>' intersex but how they are treated by 'Christians' who deny their legitimate existence and legislate to prevent their appropriate medical care and life choices.

Unfortunately, many LGBTQI+ are suffering physical and mental abuse, discrimination and hate, and denial of fundamental human rights that the rest of us enjoy, at the hands of the traditional Church and many other conservatives. They hold ancient tradition above Jesus' own commandment to love everyone. They are like the Scribes and Pharisee's of our time.

Perhaps even more distressing violations of the Sixth Commandment are Catholic priests' own sexual abuse scandals all around the world. It's not only Catholic priests but it's so contrary to the Church's strict teaching on sexuality, i.e., they all take a vow of celibacy, that it stands out from others. And even more egregious is that it was tolerated for so long as just something to hide from the public. The Church could have corrected the problem many years ago and chose not to. And it's still paying the price for that even if it's now seemingly under control (more or less, e.g., a recent scandal in Spain)

Another concern about God-given revealed moral laws is that many people throughout history for hundreds of thousands of years in all different kinds of cultures have not had those laws 'revealed' to them. And many people have chosen no religion from which those revealed laws would be made known to them. Does ignorance of those revealed laws make a person guilty of violating any of them?

Part of my answer is explained in more depth below in **Whose rules does God judge by?**

## Man-made moral laws

Subsequently, each religion has further interpreted the above natural and revealed laws into many more explicit laws for our moral behavior. Some are objectively understood, e.g., laws against murder and hate, while others are subjective as established by the governing authority, e.g., the Pope and the Magisterium for Catholics, many different religious leaders around the world, national and local governments. The subjective laws may be modified over time as the leaders feel so moved by God, e.g., not eating meat on Fridays or just politics.

An example is the debate going on right now about religions' treatment of LGBTQI+ people; conservatives totally opposed to liberal efforts to be more inclusive. Does God's love include LGBTQI+ or are they so gravely sinful that they must be excluded, ostracized, restrained, etc.? Are such restrictions God's moral laws or man-made moral laws? (see more about this below) The conservatives are absolute about it – such conduct is 'sinful' and cannot be tolerated, in fact must be eliminated. Same sex blessings – no way, that would be tolerating or even endorsing sin. In other words, they are beyond God's reach. They don't deserve God's blessing. How Christian is that?

Another example I've written about in more detail elsewhere is the **Discovery Doctrine** which was written by popes in the 15th century which allowed European explorers to morally claim supposedly 'unoccupied' territories around the world for their

own nation. From the popes' perspective, it may have been implementing Jesus' commandment to go forth and baptize all nations. It was intended under that perspective to literally save the souls of all those pagan indigenous people. But from the indigenous peoples' perspective, it was murder, violence (literally genocide) and theft of their (God-given) property. Whose side of that was God really on?

Another way to look at man-made moral laws over the centuries is a paradigm shift where societal standards evolve and what was fully acceptable then is now unacceptable, e.g., the Discovery Doctrine lasting centuries, and Native Boarding Schools lasting decades, both endorsed by the Catholic Church which has now apologized for both.

And of course, man-made moral laws include every country's legislated or dictated laws and justice systems.

**But the greatest of these is LOVE**

*I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*. John 13:34

And 1 Cor 13: *If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

*Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, love is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, embraces all things.*

*Love never fails. --- So, faith, hope and love remain, these three,* ***but the greatest of these is love****.*

This Biblical text led to the song, *They will know we are Christians by our love,* by Fr. Peter Scholtes, a song we used to sing at Mass with a guitar choir.

Again, as above about virtues, love is about behavior toward others (and God), i.e., **love is not selfish**. Love is God's gift to you, and you best reflect that love when you give it to others. We are all greatly blessed by those around us – family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, community, etc., and it's our own duty to likewise be a blessing to others. The balance between what we give and what we receive will be reflected after death in each one of us at our judgment.

See *30 Bible Verses about Love* – https://www.ibelieve.com/faith/30-bible-verses-about-love-loving-scripture-quotes.html

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) uses the word 'charity' as the virtue we know as love.

CCC 1832: *Charity is the theological **virtue** by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God*.

1827: ***The practice of all the virtues is animated and inspired by charity, which "binds everything together in perfect harmony**"; it is the form of the virtues; it articulates and orders them among themselves; it is the source and the goal of their Christian practice. Charity upholds and purifies our human ability to love and raises it to the supernatural perfection of divine love.*

As I've said above, it's my belief that love is the measure of the distance between ourselves and God; the greater our love, the closer we are to God and the lesser our love, the more distant we are from God. God is perfect love and the source of all human love; it's God's gift to us to share with himself and others. God's love flows to us through other people, and in turn, it flows through us when we love others. In heaven, our love is fulfilled and the distance from God is zero. **Love is the key to heaven.**

The truth and beauty of your own love is that the more you give it away, the more it grows. That's because you are doing God's work. It brings you closer to God.

We typically think of 'charity' as giving of one's money and/or service to 'charitable' organizations of all kinds. It's essential for these services to fund and carry out their many beneficial programs. I highly endorse and encourage charitable giving as a virtue that we all should practice to the extent possible. But I also receive more junk mail from charitable organizations requesting my 'charity' (money/donations, not love) than any other single form of mail.

Another thought: **love is gender-free**. As a virtue, it has nothing to do with sexuality or sexual identity. I love my wife, my family, my relatives and my friends. I love Kauai, the Oregon Coast, the Alpine Lakes, British Columbia and the Swiss Alps. I love good food, good movies and good concerts. The only one of those that has any sexual context is for my wife of over 62 years, and while important for a long time, is now love without sexuality.

But our conservative Christian teaching is that sexual love can only be expressed between a straight male and a straight female in a lawful marriage; no other version is tolerated. That equates love between two people as a sexual relationship instead of a personal loving relationship more along the lines of what I described above as things I love. All people have a right to love and be loved, regardless of the sexuality of the relationship. But it seems that conservative Christian narrative reflects more hate than love, more discrimination instead of acceptance, more denial of basic human rights than equal justice. That seems to be opposite of the Christian principle of love your neighbor as yourself. (CINO?)

Another conservative Christian teaching is regarding pro-life and anti-abortion. I'm certain most conservative pro-life Christians are loving and true to their faith, but it seems the extreme conservative Christians are again hateful in that they seem to go to any extent of harm to a woman in order to prevent her option or availability for an

abortion. Recent news shows that hateful attitude instead of love, and denial of basic human rights to free will and legitimate medical care. It seems that conservative Christian principles are being held higher than the commandment to love one another. And again, where does that put the Christians who hate?

In both of these narratives, it seems to come from a sense of moral superiority and self-righteousness rather than love. We are all called to love instead of hate, discrimination and denial.

In *Wayfarers in the Cosmos: the Human Quest for Meaning*, the author, George V. Coyne, S.J., writes about love and quotes from St. Augustine:

*My love of you Lord, is not some vague feeling; it is positive and certain. Your word struck into my heart and from that moment I loved you. Besides this all about me, heaven and earth and all that they contain, proclaim that I should love you, and their message never ceases to sound in the ears of all humankind, so that there is no excuse for any not to love you.*

*I have learnt to love you late. Beauty at once so ancient and so new! I have learnt to love you late. You were within me, and I was in the world outside myself. I searched for you outside myself … and I fell upon the lovely things of your creation.*

These quotes and the author's related writing about the quest for meaning, to understand what we experience in the cosmos is indeed an invitation to love. The beauty and order of all creation leads us to a "*sense of fulfillment, of joy, and of gratitude that we have the capacity to enjoy the beauty of the universe, a beauty made richer by our scientific knowledge of it."*

Another good example is the song, *What the world needs now is love*, by Hal David, Dionne Warwick and Burt Bacharach in 1965. *Not just for some but for everyone.*

Love is entirely a choice of free will; no one, not even God, can make you love someone if you don't want to, both here in this life and continuing after death. As you'll see below, I believe to grow in love is the one thing that souls in purgatory can and need to do for their advancement toward heaven. **This is the most important concept; remember this if nothing else. Love truly is the coin of salvation, the key to heaven.**

### *What dreams may come*

This is a movie with Robin Williams about life after death. It has some very descriptive ideas about heaven and hell that are consistent with my own ideas. Of course, it's very dramatic and creatively imaginative beyond the core issues that I'll discuss here.

It begins with Robin meeting his wife-to-be in an idyllic countryside in Switzerland at a beautiful lake. They fall in love, move back to normal life, marry, and have two children. A painting of that idyllic meeting place remains part of their lives and will return later in the story. The children are both killed in an auto accident and Robin's wife falls into despair and mental health problems, eventually taking her own life. Robin never forgets his wife and children with great love that lasts to the end.

When Robin dies, he goes to 'heaven' to be literally inside the painting of that beautiful, loving memory, his own version of heaven. But he doesn't find his wife there and misses her greatly. He meets a friend/advisor/companion who helps him understand what's going on and why he can't go to his wife; he's in heaven and she's in hell because of her suicide. But Robin insists that he's not in heaven if his wife is not there and demands to be taken to her. That's an impossible undertaking but Robin insists that he be given the chance.

Robin and his friend make an arduous journey to hell with the help of another advisor and ultimately finds his wife in the most miserable place you can imagine but he can't take her with him when he's forced to leave. But he's able to take her to a less miserable place in the painting although it's not heavenly. Instead, it's broken down and dark, a place where she can stay but he still must leave her to return to heaven.

Just before he has to leave, he chooses to stay with her there because his love for her is stronger than his desire to return to life in heaven without her. Once that decision is final, his love overcomes the barrier and he's able to take her outside into the beautiful painting – heaven. And the friend who helped him on the journey turns out to be their son and their daughter joins them all in the beautiful painting of heaven.

The points that I take from this are related to the realities of life after death. Heaven is a beautiful place that's filled with love. It's the best imaginable picture of your life and memories. It's the 'dream that may come.' Hell is a disgusting, miserable place and the divide from heaven is impossible to cross. To save someone from hell is impossible but love conquers all, even over hell. And the powerful love that Robin had for his wife was his willingness to stay with her in hell rather than go to heaven without her – the love that saved them both.

**Gratitude**

The proper response to love received is gratitude. Love is a gift, from God and/or others, and our obligatory response to that gift is gratitude and love in return. I pray multiple times every day, "praise and joy, love and thanksgiving" for all our blessings and everything we enjoy – it's all a gift of God, one way or another. Literally all that we receive, acquire, consume, and enjoy comes from God through the work and service of others. That's the way God works – sharing his gifts and blessings through people, so we owe thanks to God but also to the many people who pass those blessings on to us.

I also have to thank God for all his blessings that I personally have received through his Church for 75 years: for the sacraments, for the education in many forms, for the privilege to participate in various ministries, and for the resources that I use all the time. I certainly could not have become who I am without the Church. This book is an offering in thanksgiving and a mission to share my experience and knowledge with others.

I believe that thanksgiving to God is an essential part of our ultimate salvation, along with love. As we grow to fully understand God and life after death, we'll see how

connected it all has been, and we'll be thankful for all the blessings we've received. Gratitude is another of God's natural moral laws for us.

It seems that people who don't have an affirmed relationship with God don't realize or appreciate how blessed they are. They take it for granted. Or as our society teaches us, see your goal and you can achieve it if you work hard enough. They don't see the talent they have for that goal is itself a gift from God as if they can attain it on their own.

It also leads to pursuing that goal for temporal purposes, personal gain and achievement. Or as they say, he who dies with the most toys, wins. Not seeing life after death, the goal has to be achieved in this life while they can.

It will all become perfectly clear after our death, i.e., that all they've enjoyed is a gift from God. But why wait to learn this after we die? We can know about it now, here in this life, so that we can have better lives now and more so, after death, instead of a big surprise with its consequences.

**Whose rules does God judge by?**

Are we all going to be judged by exactly the same moral rules? Are they black and white? That's the real million-dollar question!

I think the fundamental core of every religion, including the Catholic Church, is that they firmly believe, for good reason, that they have the real, authentic God-given rules. But if they all are different, whose rules does God really judge by? Catholic? Jewish? Muslim? Other?

Are all peoples of other religions or no religion at all judged by God using Catholic moral standards? Are all people from the hundreds of thousands of years all over the world before Christ judged by those same rules that didn't exist until after their death? Or for that matter, are we all going to be judged by Jewish moral standards? Or Muslim? I sincerely believe, NO. Then, whose rules does God judge by? Only God's!

As Isaiah 55:8 says: *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts.*

The Catholic Church states in many ways that it has infallible knowledge and judgment as to the singular God-given moral rules. And it's a very exclusive, conservative standard. From that viewpoint, the rest of humanity for all times, cultures and religions will be judged by those same Catholic-interpreted and stated moral rules whether they knew them or not.

Unfortunately, throughout the centuries, that certainty about its infallible judgment and that it is carrying out God's will has led it to superimpose its moral standards on other peoples and religions against their free will. It's a sense of moral superiority that justified its actions, including violence and genocide, as if directed by God. Examples of that sense gone wrong: the Crusades – 11$^{th}$ through 13$^{th}$ centuries; the

Inquisitions – 12th century through Middle Ages and beyond; the Discovery Doctrine which led to European colonialism around the world beginning in 1452 through mid-19th century and just recently apologized for; indigenous boarding schools – mid-17th through early 20th centuries also recently apologized for; wars against other Christians – notably the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre 1572; etc. The Church now admits that those historical teachings were wrong. But you can't undo the past. (Wikipedia history)

That sense of moral superiority is still in place today and continues to impose Church policies on abortion, restrictions on employment and health care, and public discrimination against targeted populations, e.g., abortion proponents, LGBTQI+, etc. And now we have five Catholic Supreme Court Justices putting those Catholic / Christian policies into our national legal framework. Has the Church itself been following God's rules about love and compassion for everyone?

That sense of moral superiority and self-righteousness seems to be a driver in the conservative Christian community – Catholic, Protestant Evangelical, etc., and is the basis for the drive toward Christian Nationalism – the imposing of Christian standards on all constituents of our country whether they like it or not.

Another example of that line of thinking is the 'dubia' questions that five conservative prelates asked Pope Francis before the recent Synod in Rome. They sound just like the Scribes and Pharisees, the conservatives of their day, questioning Jesus – justify yourself. Why don't you follow our traditional rules?

Which raises the other million-dollar question – is God conservative or liberal? Both within the Church and in our world-wide societies? Which is God's favorite? Whose side is he on? If the two viewpoints are so contradictory, how could they both be right? Or wrong?

The answer is: that's the wrong question. God is neither – those are human terms for conflicting ideologies, not theological terms. And it ties back to my earlier comments on truth – ideology is an intersubjective truth, believed by many but not necessarily based on objective reality. It's equally okay to be conservative or liberal as long as you faithfully practice your choice, but not to the extent of harming or discriminating against others who choose otherwise. That's a violation of love and free will. But all ideologies that espouse hate in any form are absolutely against God's commandments to love.

God gave mankind a free will (see next section below) and with it, the choice of ideology from one extreme to the other. Ideology is, in and of itself, neither good nor bad, it's just an idea. It's how that ideology is implemented, how it treats other people, what are its impacts; that's what makes it right or wrong. But ideology of any kind that is based on hate or malice is contrary to all the above natural moral laws and God's explicit commandment to love and is always evil. Judgment will be based on the spectrum of love (or evil) in your soul.

One's personal ideology, conservative or liberal or whatever, is not a direct factor in how God will judge us. It's one of many criteria of a person's measure and is offset

or balanced by other behavior, good or bad, e.g., virtues, sins, how one treats others, and ultimately one's love for God and of one's neighbor. That's where the rubber meets the road!

It seems to me that the conservative approach to abortion as we've seen in numerous public cases is extremely harmful to the individual's experiencing their strict laws. Likewise, the conservative approach to many of the LGBTQI+ restrictions are harmful to many individually and collectively, precluding them from employment or other common human rights, precluding them from safe and appropriate medical care, etc. Not only physical and mental harm, but also grave injustice. And it's certainly against God's rules of love and compassion. None of the above moral laws in nature or in God's revealed laws allow for unjust harm against others, including discrimination and denial of basic human rights and needs. Having strict conservative values is fine but it crosses the line when they are imposed on others against their free will in harmful and unjust ways.

Mixing religion and medical practice is neither good religion nor good medicine. Denial of appropriate or necessary medical treatment based on thousands of years old tradition goes against modern medicine and God's fundamental teaching that we have an obligation to take care of our own health and the health of others. The goal of medicine is to provide the care needed for each individual, not denial based on ideology.

Similar arguments can be made about Jewish and Muslim leaders, e.g., the Israel-Hamas war, and although I don't fully understand other religions, it's now happening in India and other places around the world. And the same principle applies to atheist regimes, e.g., Russia, China, North Korea, etc. Everyone seems to have a sense of moral superiority and the right to impose their moral standards on others, even to the extent of war and violence. Again, any ideologies that espouse hate are against God's rule to love.

I'm aware that writing this book may be seen by some as moral superiority on my own part but I pray not. My goal is education so the reader can have a more informed conscience about life choices and the subsequent consequences after death.

I wrote in my book, *A Window Into My Soul*, that: *"God isn't Catholic. Nor Protestant, nor Muslim, not Jewish, nor Buddhist. God is universal."* God has a personal relationship with every person that lives or has ever lived, regardless of their religion. God loves and welcomes all peoples. The question isn't about God; it's about how each individual relates to God.

I understand that's counter to the explicit teaching of the Church that everyone must be baptized (Christian) in order to get to heaven. The Catechism 1257 says, *"Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament.* ***The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude****; ---"*

And yet, Jesus' parable about the Good Shepherd, John 10:16 says: *I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. There also I must lead, and they will hear my voice,*

*and there will be one flock, one shepherd*. It seems Jesus was referring to more than just Christians as his sheep. This led the deacon in my parish to recently say in his homily that "God isn't Catholic," similar to my comment above.

But it's not that simple. If you were born and raised Catholic, and then you form your own conscience based on those rules, those most likely will be the standards for your judgment (but it's even more complex than that). And I believe the same goes for Jewish people, Muslims, etc. The standards we are primarily going to be judged by are those of our own conscience. If you believe, with a well-informed conscience, that something is right or wrong, then you will likely be judged based on how well you follow your own conscience, not someone else's standards.

Each person has a moral obligation to properly form their own conscience about right and wrong and to follow that conscience. Judgment will be how well you have kept to those standards. You will be rewarded for your good actions and be held accountable for your failures. That's what life after death is all about.

So, what are those universal rules? First, look above at the natural moral laws, primarily the virtues. Those natural moral laws apply to everyone, everywhere, at all times. If you are a virtuous person, you are a good person, and God will judge you accordingly. If you are a good Catholic, you must also follow the Catholic rules. And the same goes for all other religions. Follow the rules of your own properly formed conscience and you won't go too far wrong.

And again, most importantly, the greatest of these is LOVE, because if you always follow that rule, you won't go wrong. If you are a good person, you can still become better by increasing your love of God and others. If you are not a good person, the best place to improve is in your love and to do no harm to others.

But what about people (many I see on the news every night) that don't seem to have moral standards at all? Teen-age murderers? Young girl beating an older woman for her purse? Smash and grab looting? They don't have a well-formed conscience, so it isn't telling them that's a bad thing to do. Same for criminals of all kinds – murderers, rapists, thieves, fraudsters, etc. It's incomprehensible to those with good moral standards that some others are so wrong and yet never hesitate in their harmful actions.

But a poorly formed conscience is not a 'get out of jail free' card. Instead, it may well be a 'get into hell' card because Satan is also at work with opposite rules and some or many may follow them instead of God's rules. They will be held accountable, sooner or later. Everyone is responsible for forming a good conscience and following it. And that's what judgment after death is all about.

It's even more complex now when we compare conservative versus liberal standards. We all look at the exact same issue and come to totally opposite conclusions, e.g., abortion, sexual identity, etc. Who's right or wrong? Is only one always right and the other always wrong? Yes, from the conservative standpoint, but NO. As long as each one is following their own well-formed conscience, ok. But again, they all (both sides)

have a moral obligation to form their conscience according to God's natural moral laws. But some may instead be following Satan's rules.

And most importantly, we each should not be the judge of the other. That's repeated in the Bible. Follow the natural moral laws yourself and let others do the same, even if they come to different conclusions. God will sort it out in the end.

NOTE: I don't want to disparage the Church because it has also contributed greatly to proper moral leadership and human civilization in many ways, but it also needs to be accountable for the harm that it's done/is doing. We need to learn from those mistakes, not perpetuate them.

**Free will**

Regardless of all the above 'laws' for human behavior, God created all mankind with almost (see below) unlimited free will to make the choices to obey or disobey moral rules or otherwise think, talk and act. That's a key piece of this whole picture. Without free will, we'd still be animals living in caves. God gave us free will in order for us to fully enjoy his creation including life after death, if we choose it. But it's a two-sided coin because it also allows us to choose evil. It may be our greatest gift but also our most dangerous curse. Good vs. evil; virtue vs. vice; love vs. hate. And that's the basis for life's consequences after death – the good or bad choices we make in this life.

When we train a dog, we provide immediate reward for good behavior or immediate punishment for bad behavior; praise and treats for good, firm vocal rebuke or physical punishment for bad. Dogs can quickly learn to do as we command just based on immediate reward or punishment. We somewhat similarly reward or punish children to teach them good behavior. Sometimes it works, sometimes not and we don't necessarily do a good job of it. Some children learn quickly and retain good behavior, but it seems to lose its effectiveness during teenage years, the key years of the moral development of our free will.

Reward and punishment are a natural part of our civil society but it's not always fair or immediate. As they say, "justice delayed is justice denied." The disconnect between bad choices and timely punishment, or no punishment at all, makes it seem like there's no consequence for bad behavior. It's no wonder that bad choices abound in the news every day.

Also, our rewards aren't sufficient to always produce the desired results, and our punishments don't necessarily deter crime. We're now seeing a lot of crime by 12-17 year-old children – they see an immediate reward for their crime and don't see or respect the potential for punishment. I don't recall in previous times, 12–14-year-old children car-jacking people at gun point and leading police on high-speed chases but they do now. All acts of free will.

Again, God doesn't limit our free will or train us with immediate reward or punishment. Maybe we wouldn't do some bad things if God gave us an immediate

headache or sickness or some other pain and we knew it was a direct result of our bad choices. Maybe we would do more good things if God gave us immediate reward that we knew was directly related to our good choices. Unfortunately, God doesn't work that way.

Every evening on the news, I see people doing some very bad things, apparently seeking what they perceive as immediate reward – money, fame, ego, etc., partly because they don't seem to see nor respect impending punishment. Or they know that punishment is weak, or they can escape it entirely. And our justice system is necessarily slow in punishment to protect the rights of the offenders. Why be good if there's no perceived punishment for being bad.

The Church teaches the following regarding free will:

CCC 1730: *God created man a rational being, conferring on him the dignity of a person who can initiate and control his own actions. --- Man is rational and therefore like God, he is created with free will and is master over his acts.*

1731: *Freedom is the power, rooted in reason and will, to act or not to act, to do this or that, and so to perform deliberate actions on one's own responsibility. By free will, one shapes one's own life. Human freedom is a force for growth and maturity in truth and goodness; it attains its perfection when directed toward God, our beatitude.*

1732: *As long as freedom has not bound itself definitively to its ultimate good which is God, there is the possibility of choosing between good and evil, and thus of growing in perfection or of failing and sinning. --- It is the basis of praise or blame, merit or reproach.*

1734: *Freedom makes man responsible for his acts to the extent that they are voluntary. Progress in virtue, knowledge of the good and ascesis enhance the mastery of the will over its acts.* (ascesis: rigorous active self-restraint, self-control, self-discipline - the act of denying oneself; controlling ones' impulses – obviously an act of free will itself)

1736: *Every act directly willed is imputable to its author.*

1738: *Freedom is exercised in relationship between human beings.* ***Every human person, created in the image of God, has the natural right to be recognized as a free and responsible being. All owe to each other this duty of respect. The right to the exercise of freedom, especially in moral and religious matters, is an inalienable requirement of the dignity of the human person. This right must be recognized and protected by civil authority within the limits of the common good and public order.*** (my emphasis)

That last one can be interpreted for freedom of religion and making one's own choices regarding moral issues, but it seems hypocritical and unfair to not also apply it to LGBTQI+ and women's rights to abortion where the Church and the religious right are blatant and vindictive about limiting or eliminating the rights to the free will of those

peoples who go against the Church's teaching. It seems strongly contradictory to the explicit teaching above.

The Church, the religious right and like-minded conservatives have taken over government in some states and imposed their moral standards by law and punishment against abortion and LGBTQI+ against their civil rights to choose for themselves. The government makes decisions for them against their free will. And the Church similarly enforces its moral standards in Church employment, schools and medical institutions against our LGBTQI+ neighbors' free will.

Religious freedom allows individuals to choose their own form of faith, religious or not, but it also allows them to be free from others, placing their religious standards on them against their will. That's a two-edged sword and is being used by the religious right to discriminate against and deny service to those who seemingly violate their standards. That's now the standard after the recent Supreme Court's rulings.

And as Pope Francis says, the Church is 'open to everyone,' but then adds that we have rules. If you want to work for us or attend our schools or receive our health care, you have to follow our rules. So much for respecting people's inalienable right to free will.

It's taken further when conservative state legislators write and pass laws implementing their personal Christian standards to be imposed on everyone in their jurisdiction regardless of their free will to choose otherwise, e.g., abortion or sexuality. Same goes for conservative judges who impose their own religious standards instead of the laws. That's Christian nationalism at work and it gets back to the point above in **Whose rules does God judge by?** about conservative Christians' sense of moral superiority and self-claimed right to impose their standards on everyone. It's absolutely denying their free will.

In some states, the same-minded governors and legislators have passed book bans and laws to prevent the teaching of ideas that go against their values, e.g. woke (whatever that really means). In other words, don't teach true history if it's offensive to white Christians who don't want to face the reality of it all. In some, they require the Ten Commandments (Christian morality) be placed in places of honor in schools and in at least one, require that Bibles (preferably the Trump version) in schools. Similarly, the argument goes that creationism should be taught equally to scientific knowledge about how the world was created. All regardless of the Constitution that prevents the government from establishing religion.

Inalienable free will also precludes pre-destination – the principle some people hold that God (or Satan) has already determined our fate. Pre-destination would mean that God has already determined our outcome and chooses the winners and losers. If that were true, then we wouldn't really have free will; our lives would just be determined by God's will. We would be just acting out a script that someone else has written and wouldn't be responsible for our own actions. God and Satan certainly influence our

direction but neither forces our choices – we make the ultimate decisions with accountability and justice for them accordingly.

The only thing that is pre-destined is our mortality – we will all die sometime, somehow. God has the power to take control at any time but that would mean over-riding our free will. Instead, God allows the natural processes which are unpredictable and can change the course of our lives either way, including many forms of death.

To the extent that nature and its effects are an extension or dimension of God, you could say that God is responsible for those outcomes, but God doesn't normally use natural powers for or against us, e.g., drought, storms, fires, earthquakes. Parts of the Bible seem to say, and some people believe, that God wields a mighty sword and uses those natural events to either punish us for our sinfulness or to send a warning for us to get back in line with him. I don't believe that to be true. Love and justice are more accurate descriptions of God because natural disasters harm indiscriminately against both the good and the bad, the total opposite of love and justice.

But there are reasonable and just limitations to our free will. While God gave us free will, he also established reasonable limits – the above natural moral laws. There are rules everywhere we live: at home, at work, at school, in public, etc., by governments, institutions, and certainly at church. Choosing to follow them is a natural act of free will, e.g., rules of behavior on a commercial airplane where you give up a lot of free will. Do this; don't do that. Yes, we are free to disobey them but there are just consequences, one of which is to lightly or strictly limit our freedom, e.g., jail/prison for disobeying laws of governments and punishment after death for disobeying God's laws.

Another example of limitation of free will is in the military or similar institutions. A member is obliged to obey legitimate orders from higher authority; no free choice is allowed. But that transfers responsibility for those orders to those in authority. You may be free to disobey them, but again with due punishment. On the other hand, you may have an obligation to disobey an unjust or illegal order.

Free will choices have consequences, and they come due after death, hence the title of this book. You will still have free will after death, an essential part of your eternal soul. But you will have to choose to love God in order to receive God's gifts on your journey to heaven – God doesn't force it on you. More about that above and later.

### My way or the highway

Or sometimes, rule by minority.

It seems to me that God gave us free will to act individually but his desire is for us to act collectively for the good of all, not just ourselves. That's what love and virtues are all about – love your neighbor as yourself.

But that's not what I'm seeing in the Church or society overall.

The 2024 Congress was hog-tied by a radical minority and only getting the real business of the government done when a bipartisan majority overruled that minority.

Otherwise, the minority resists and impedes everything on the bipartisan agenda, i.e., the business of government, unless their radical agenda is met. What about the Constitution and the Bill of Rights – all men are created equal; a government of the people, by the people and for the people? What about others' freedom to choose? No, it's my way or the highway.

The recent (2024) pro-Palestine demonstrations on American college campuses repeatedly said, we won't move on until our demands are met, i.e., divestiture from Israel and American businesses that support Israel. What about universities being open to all peoples and nationalities and cultures? What about the needs of Israel's peoples? They also seem to refuse to acknowledge that Hamas started this war with unbelievable atrocities and still won't relent even while all Palestinians suffer for their unachievable agendas. The destruction of Gaza and the many civilian lives lost is because Hamas fights from within the civilian infrastructure, behind human shields. Hamas also holds hostages as human shields. The war would be over in a minute if Hamas accepted defeat when they have no way of winning. No, it's my way or the highway.

The United Nations and other broad coalitions of nations join together for the common good of all (at least supposedly). On the other side, authoritarian strongmen (dictators and military forces), a definite minority in their own nations, impose their will and punish any and all opposition. What about all the peoples in those nations who suffer in many ways under those governments? And other nations who are the victims of their aggression? No, it's my way or the highway.

Similarly, the conservative hierarchy, media and activists – Catholic, evangelicals and others, insist that their positions on abortion, LGBTQI+ and other agendas must be followed even when those policies impact the general population who oppose those agendas. What about the freedom of those who believe differently to choose for themselves? What about their suffering – denied opportunities, jobs and health care. No, it's my way or the highway.

Free will is God's gift to everyone, not just the minority who insist on their own way instead of accepting the needs and will of the majority? No, it's my way or the highway.

## Mental health and emotional effect on free will

Responsibility (and judgment) for wrong-doing presumes that the offending person is acting with full knowledge of their actions and free will choice to do it. But sometimes people do bad or evil things without really knowing what they are doing or doing it under an influence that precludes free will. Our justice system recognizes that when a person is found not guilty by reason of insanity or not held on trial when they are not mentally competent. They may be confined to a mental institution for treatment but still not held guilty in a criminal sense.

I'm not educated in psychology or psychiatry so look to those experts for a better discussion about guilt and responsibility for mentally ill individuals' actions, but from a moral standpoint, I believe that God fully understands the mental capability of a person when judging their eternal consequences. It's up to God to balance between the guilt of the offender and justice for their victims.

Examples of mental health may be depression or despair. They cloud the person's mental ability to make right choices, and they may not be as responsible for harm and/or suicide. You could make the argument that most (not all) suicides are directly related to mental health issues. We can't see inside them to know and certainly can't judge them.

The Catechism (CCC 2280-2283) guides us regarding suicide in the chapter on the Fifth Commandment – *thou shall not kill*. Everyone is responsible for protecting and preserving their own lives. *It is not ours to dispose of*. But, *grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide. We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives*.

Similarly, I believe that strong emotions can temporarily reduce a person's control of their behavior, and they may do bad or evil things while very emotionally disturbed, e.g., road rage incidents or shooting in great anger. Likewise for people under the influence of alcohol or drugs. They lose rational control over their actions. But in these cases, typically our justice system still finds them guilty but maybe to a lesser degree. They are still held responsible for their behavior. Again, God knows what's going on in their mind when judging.

## Justice

The physical natural laws of science and life are self-enforcing by nature. Unfortunately, all moral laws can be obeyed or disobeyed by human free will, so there must be some form of **consequence** and that is **justice**; reward for good, punishment for bad. Justice is a basic principle of God's creation. Without justice, human life would be chaos. There would be no reason to choose good if there was no consequence for choosing evil. God's justice is accountability for our actions. It's necessary to achieve order and balance in our society. And it's the ultimate fairness for the life we live here and now.

If anyone, anywhere, anytime has harmed others in any way – physically, mentally or spiritually, God's justice demands equivalent reparation in one form or another, now or after death, regardless of one's stature, religious or otherwise. Without that ultimate justice, the whole system of morality, i.e., good vs. evil, would fall apart and evil wins. God is that ultimate, unbiased justice and his justice will prevail. That fact gives me hope

when I look around at all the suffering and injustice at the hands of harmful people, institutions and governments. No one can escape God's justice.

It seems now that many of our government leaders from the top down have and are continuing to harm many in our country and around the world. Unjust firings, unjust arrest and detention, unjust deportation, unjust retribution, unjust coercion and harassment, unjust discrimination and treatment, unjust denial of legitimate needs and care, etc., are harming thousands or millions of people.

All of that violates God primary commandment to love and care for others, especially those in need in any way. Violation of God's love for others will stand in the way of salvation because it increases the distance from God who is all and only love.

Justice should be a deterrent, but it seems that many of those doing harm are oblivious to it. That's Satan's delusion at work.

It is my firm belief that, after death, every one of us will be faced with the reality and responsibility for any and all unjust harm that we have done to others in this life. I believe that somehow God will hold everyone accountable, and his justice will require comparable reparation for the harm we have inflicted. Not 'an eye for an eye' but simply equitable justice.

We may have already accomplished some of that reparation in this life by accepting our responsibility for it and somehow making amends, or in the good things we have done or the suffering we have borne. But to the extent that we have not accomplished adequate reparation, it will be borne after our death.

In the case of life after death, the consequences for following or disobeying the above moral laws is judgment and justice in the form of time in purgatory which may be very painful or hell which will be eternal.

One of the individuals in the video ***After Death*** described his own review of his life and the people that he somehow harmed or offended. He felt very ashamed and guilty for that harm, knowing that God saw it all. After he returned to life, he still felt that guilt in his life back on earth.

Generally, those who have had near-death experiences, come back to life with a much greater understanding of good and bad behavior, and have a positive response to live a better life, some remarkably so.

## Creation – Biblical version

For some of us, the story of creation in the Bible, i.e., Genesis 1:1-3, is believed to be literally true – God created the entire cosmos including the earth and mankind as well as all the other plants and animals in six calendar days. Included in that narrative were the first humans, Adam and Eve who were initially perfect and perhaps eternal, living in the Garden of Eden until Adam ate the apple against God's direct command and consequently, they and all mankind thereafter were condemned to suffering and mortality, the consequences of Adam's singular 'original' sin. And according to online biblical timelines, this all happened about six thousand plus years ago. There are

different versions of how to interpret Genesis, but they all hold to the core description above.

The Old Testament then goes on to tell of Adam and Eve's children and successors, Moses, the prophets, et al, up to the time of Christ. The Judeo-Christian heritage is based on this timeline, and some insist that it be taken literally. There is a recent effort to establish the scientific basis for that literal timeline: *Is Genesis history* is a documentary DVD to support it. I regularly see articles online that describe 'discoveries' that support that theory, e.g., the quest for Noah's ark.

To put the Biblical timeline in perspective with a scientific timeline of humanity: early human ancestors began around 2 million years ago (I just saw online that it could have been 7 million years ago), Homo Sapiens (us humans) began 150,000 – 300,000 years ago (depending on your source), evidence of human activity in China 20,000 BC, humans in South America 13,000 BC, wild grain harvesting began in Egypt 10,500 BC, agriculture in Mesopotamia and South America 8,000 BC, livestock and agriculture are totally consolidated in Mesopotamia and the first cities appeared 6,000 to 5,000 BC, societies appeared with monumental architecture in South America 4,000 BC. In other words, the reality (objective truth) is that **early human civilization existed all over the world long before** the timeline of Biblical creation and Genesis was written. (timeline from Wikipedia)

So, how does the Church address this apparent contradiction? The Catechism of the Catholic Church addresses its teaching on the Bible in detail in the first chapters with the specific conclusion that: *God is the author of Sacred Scripture. "The divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in the text of Sacred Scripture, have been written down under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit."* (CCC 105) *The inspired books teach the truth*. (CCC 107)

The next statements talk about interpretation and sense of the Scripture but hold exclusive authority over interpretation by the Church. It recognizes some of the context issues by saying, *"Even though they* (Old Testament) *contain matters imperfect and provisional, …"* (CCC 122) allowing some room for its own limited interpretation.

In the front of my Bible, there's a section about *Reading Your Bible* which includes a description of the use of *Literary Genres or Forms*. That somewhat opens Genesis to other than literal interpretation. And later it says, *"You may make your own choice as long as it is not contrary to the teaching authority of the Church."* But, to the best of my knowledge, the Church does not offer an explicit alternative description of creation to that described in Genesis.

My concern about teaching that every word in the Old Testament is God's own intended word is based on blind faith for its own sake, and not on intelligence or good judgment. It has led to many of mankind's problems throughout history.

**Creation – scientific version**

The 'Big Bang' theory places the initial explosion of creation (if we want to call it that) approximately 13.8 billion years ago. Some recent scientific reports say it may have been twice that long ago; it doesn't really make a significant difference to me either way. The blast formed the initial stars which were atomic furnaces of energy and light. Subsequent death and collapse of stars created the rest of the material elements we now know on the Periodic Table of Elements based on their atomic structure. Somehow through gravity, vast clouds of these heavy elements consolidated into planets and moons, the earth being one of many.

*Earth formed around 4.54 billion years ago, approximately one-third the age of the universe, by accretion from the solar nebula. Volcanic outgassing probably created the primordial atmosphere and then the ocean, but the early atmosphere contained almost no oxygen. Much of the Earth was molten because of frequent collisions with other bodies which led to extreme volcanism. While the Earth was in its earliest stage (Early Earth), a giant impact collision with a planet-sized body named Theia is thought to have formed the Moon. Over time, the Earth cooled, causing the formation of a solid crust, and allowing liquid water on the surface.*

*The earliest undisputed evidence of life on Earth dates at least from 3.5 billion years ago. Photosynthetic organisms appeared between 3.2 and 2.4 billion years ago and began enriching the atmosphere with oxygen. Life remained mostly small and microscopic until about 580 million years ago, when complex multicellular life arose, developed over time, and culminated in the Cambrian Explosion about 541 million years ago. This sudden diversification of life forms produced most of the major phyla known today, ---.* (excerpts from Wikipedia, History of Earth)

*Scientists have announced that the oldest living creature on our planet is a jellyfish-like organism called a ctenophore. It evolved from the same primordial animals that humans did.*

*This fascinating creature first emerged 700 million years ago, a significant time before the dinosaurs, which appeared only 230 million years ago. The study found that ctenophores are the closest relatives of the first animals and can still be spotted in modern-day oceans and aquariums.*

*When most people consider animals, they think of creatures like worms, flies, mollusks, sea stars, and vertebrates. For instance, worms evolved approximately 500 million years ago, and vertebrates appeared about 450 million years ago.*

*Together, these creatures are known as bilaterians, which have evolved to have a centralized brain, a gut running from mouth to anus, muscles, and other shared features. These features were present by the time of the well-known 'Cambrian Explosion' around 500 million years ago.*

*Jellyfish are classified as bona fide animals, despite their lack of many bilaterian features. They do not have a defined brain and may not even possess a nervous system*

*or muscles. Nevertheless, they still exhibit the hallmarks of animal life, such as developing multicellular bodies from a fertilized egg.*

*Ctenophores are generally translucent, gelatinous organisms that range in size from a few millimeters to 1.5 meters in length. They are radially symmetrical and have soft, flexible bodies. Most species are bioluminescent, capable of producing light through a chemical reaction.*

*Ctenophores are carnivorous, feeding on a variety of small marine organisms such as larvae, plankton, and sometimes other ctenophores. They use their sticky tentacles to catch prey. Some larger species do not have tentacles and instead swallow their prey whole. Interestingly, despite their predatory habits, ctenophores lack a true digestive system. Instead, they have a network of canals that distribute nutrients throughout their bodies.*

*Most ctenophores are hermaphroditic, meaning each individual possesses both male and female reproductive organs. They can reproduce both sexually, by releasing eggs and sperm into the water for external fertilization, and asexually, through a process known as budding.*
(https://www.earth.com/news/oldest-living-creature-on-earth-identified-emerging-700-million-years-ago/)

*After the Cambrian explosion, life on earth was climbing in diversity. Many new species of plants and animals separated onto a path of evolution. New forms of life began to appear. Plants began colonizing the land, and fish began swimming in the seas. The first life on land started as algae gradually adapted to be able to live on dry land.*
(humanoriginproject.com/evolution-and-timeline-of-life-on-earth/)

My comment: that sudden diversification came about because of God's creation of bisexual reproduction as described above in the earth.com article about ctenophores, at first with both male and female organs within the same 'body' and later evolving into separate male and female bodies. More about that later in my theory of creation and why it's a very important element of all life forms.

*Around 400 million years ago, the first four-legged animals started to develop. These animals, known as tetrapods, are the ancestors to all birds, mammals, reptiles and even amphibians. The first amphibians appear soon after, living on sea floors and in shallow marine ecologies. They were the first species to branch off from the tetrapods. Insects are next, although they took some time to develop wings. Then reptiles developed in swamps and tropical forests, which were mainly made up of ferns and other ancient coniferous plants.*

*250 million years ago marked the first emergence of dinosaurs. They were pre-empted by a mass extinction event that shattered all life on earth. Around a third of life on planet earth was wiped out, marking a huge fork in the timeline of life on earth. Yet, as life has shown to do throughout history, it continued on living.* (see **Natural laws**

above) *The dinosaurs weren't initially the dominant species on the planet. It would take 50 million years to take over the entire planet.*

*200 million years ago, the first mammals appear. It was soon after the dinosaurs became the dominant species on earth. These mammals were very small, many no larger than mice.*

*66 million years ago saw the Cretaceous-Tertiary extinction event. It was the mass extinction that saw dinosaurs wiped from the face of the earth. It meant that mammals, which were previously living in the shadow of the dinosaur, could take over and dominate the land. They started small, but quickly grew and diversified, enjoying their new dinosaur-free world. It was around this time that primates began spreading and diverging into new species. Lemurs, gibbons, bonobos, orangutans, gorillas, and even modern humans are all linked to this point in the timeline of life on earth.* (humanoriginproject.com/evolution-and-timeline-of-life-on-earth/)

*Hominid" (Hominidae family) have the broadest meaning referring to all Great Apes and their ancestors. Hominids were the early proto-humans who are believed to have stemmed from lesser apes such as modern gibbons. Hominids which include gorillas, orangutans, chimpanzees, bonobos, and humans existed 11 to 16 million years ago.*

*Hominins are extinct or alive species that are more closely related to humans than chimpanzees. This includes Genus Homo, Australopithecus, Ardipithecus, and Paranthropus. Humans are the only remaining living hominin. Hominins which include the human species and immediate ancestors emerged about 7 million years ago in Africa.* (a recent article says it may have occurred in Europe)

*Homo or "human being" emerged from the extinct Australopithecus genus. The first appearance of the Homo genus was in Eastern Africa as the "Homo Habilis" species. It stood about one meter tall with a larger brain and teeth than its australopithecine relatives. Homo Habilis arose 2.8 million years ago in Africa.*

*Finally, Homo Sapiens made their first appearance on the family tree about 200,000 years ago in Africa with modern faces and larger brains. Neanderthals had an equally large brain, which existed about 300,000 years ago.* (earthhow.com/human-timeline)

The book, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, by Yuval Noah Harari, is a very good overview of our ancestors and the transition from cave man to hunter-gatherers to farmers to civilizations. I take exception to some of his premises but enjoyed and learned a lot from it.

### ***The Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin, 1859**

I have this book in Kindle form and wrote an extensive review of it. It established the primary basis for the common scientific understanding of the evolution of life from

its first simple and primitive forms to complex plants and animals and eventually human beings.

*"Neo-Darwinism, as we may call the modern theory of gradual transformation operated by* ***natural selection*** *acting on a Mendelian genetic outfit of* ***self-reproducing and self-varying genes****, is fully accepted by the great majority of students of evolution. Today, a century after the publication of Origin, Darwin's great discovery,* ***the universal principle of natural selection****, is firmly and finally established as* ***the sole agency*** ***of major evolutionary change****."*

Darwin's theory is based on a continuous process of each and every species evolving in slight incremental steps over many reproductive cycles and over a very long period of time, gradually modifying the genetics of the species to better adapt to its environment and well-being. It's an entirely natural process with no 'creator,' just nature itself doing what it takes to improve and expand upon life, again per (God's) natural laws discussed above.

Darwin dismissed the question about how it all began or even how life itself began because he had no basis on which to know, so why waste time speculating about it. He also stated that his theory would fail if a major change in species occurred in a short time span for some other reason which he couldn't explain. That of course happened throughout the above description in **Creation - scientific version**.

We've learned a lot more about life on earth over the last 150 plus years since Darwin, but his theory of evolution is still the predominant theory for the origin of human life. (See a new theory of evolution above at the end of **Natural laws**)

**My theory of creation**

To me it's obvious from all that we see and experience that God exists and that God created the entire cosmos including earth and all life on it. But my first question is – Why? Why would God create all this, the entire cosmos and our little planet here with our own lives? Not because he 'needs' it all, or us; not out of ego or pride or other selfish reasons. **God created it all for us**, for you and me, and all the other billions of people that have ever or will ever live. Why – **simply and only because of his love** for us that we may all have the opportunity to share in his creation and his immense love and peace and joy in heaven for eternity.

It's a gift from God to humanity, but two things: you have to accept it by responding to God, and many (or most) people don't recognize the connection, so they don't choose it. Why? Because Satan offers conflicting attractions that stand in the way of recognizing and choosing God. Satan will offer anything and everything to keep you from God. It's that simple.

The Biblical version has God creating the entire cosmos including human beings in six days. In reality, creation wasn't a single event but a continuous process over

billions of years, slowly, step-by-step, all driven by God's plan and implementation, creating new elements as they were needed.

**Here's my theory of the creative process:**

Before the 'beginning' of time, God existed alone in a spiritual, unlimited nature; nothing else existed, nothing at all. All knowledge, power and wisdom existed in God's nature. God planned and developed the creative processes with his desired results before the beginning of creation itself. From the first point in time, all the rest of the continuous creative process occurred in a sequence of phases determined by God. From that point, everything was 'created' based on what he had already created, but obviously God could do anything he desired at any time in the process. The entire process of creation was implemented based on God's design, intent and control. That marked the beginning of 'time.'

The first phase of creation was the first angels, alike God in spiritual nature but with limited capabilities – they had no previous experience or knowledge on which to base their actions. God could have created them in a long sequence of individual angels through some process or he could have created them instantly in large numbers just by an act of his intent and will. There was no hurry or measure of time so why not give each angel its own 'birth' and nurturing before subsequent angels.

At that point, heaven was all a spiritual monoculture, i.e., no diversity (and no sexual identity because it wasn't relevant at that point). But each angel somehow had a unique identity, maybe a name, maybe the spiritual equivalent of genetics.

The next step was for God to 'educate' them to develop their intellect, memory and skills. And the first thing they were taught was to love God as he loved them. That's like our own children; the first thing they experience is a loving mother and father and their natural response is to love in return. Then God could continue to educate them with his own knowledge of all things.

When they were sufficiently prepared with knowledge and abilities, God gave the angels free will to be able to choose and make independent decisions about what to do. As a necessary part of that free will, God allowed them the full range of choices from supernatural goodness to supernatural evil; any limitations would preclude it from being complete free will. God did that so the angels could know and love him freely instead of being programmed or forced to do him homage. And they all 'lived' in 'heaven,' full of love, knowledge and peace.

Once they had the fullness of knowledge and free will, some angels, led by Lucifer, saw themselves as equivalent to God and chaffed at any restrictions on their desires. Out of pride, ego and selfishness, they chose jealousy and hate and wanted independence from God's restrictions which opened all the rest of creation to the reality of evil. That's the real 'original sin' which resulted in those angels being banished from heaven and taking up their lives in hell. From that point in time, evil nature co-existed with goodness in all of creation, including subsequent humanity.

The next phase of creation was the second level of angels who, along with God and the first level of angels, prepared for the creation of the cosmos. As described in *Angels and the supernatural,* (Good Catholic, see Bibliography): *They are governors of the cosmos, overseeing and bringing about the will of God for the universe. While all angels have power over material elements, this hierarchy in particular has stewardship over creation*. By this point, God had already developed and put in place all the natural laws of physics, matter and energy that would govern the physical creation of the cosmos.

It could have taken God and the angels collectively billions of years to prepare the resources and environment for the 'big bang,' the next phase of creation. And from that point, we have physical, scientific knowledge about the remaining phases of 'creation.'

The next phase of the cosmos lasted billions of years from the 'big bang' to the physical consolidation of stars, planets, moons and whatever else is out there and ultimately the planet earth, in orbit around our sun. And it was all under the dual nature of God and angels in their spiritual nature and the physical cosmos in material nature.

In *Wayfarers in the Cosmos: the Human Quest for Meaning*, author George V. Coyne, S.J., describes how that physical process went. Coyne is (or was when the book was written in 2002) a distinguished astronomer, director of the Vatican Observatory, and head of the Observatory's research group based at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

*A cluster consists of a family of stars of different masses, formed from various pieces resulting from the breakup of a large gaseous cloud. Due to gravity, each piece began to collapse and, consequently, to heat up to start a thermonuclear furnace by converting hydrogen to helium. At this point, we have a star.*

*More massive stars collapse more rapidly, reaching a higher internal temperature, and so their thermonuclear furnace is more energetic. They are bright blue stars. The less massive stars collapse more slowly, reach a lower internal temperature, and so are less energetic. They are faint red stars.*

*The sun happens to be intermediate, a yellow-green star with a surface temperature of about 6,500 degrees Kelvin (absolute zero scale). Of course, the more massive stars will burn up their thermonuclear fuel more rapidly and so will 'die' sooner than the less massive stars. Thus, we see intuitively that the life and death of stars are determined by their mass.*

*Why does a star die? As it converts hydrogen to helium in its core, a star succeeds by the radiant energy generated to keep its outer layers from crushing in as gravity will inevitably cause them to do. Radiation pressure is warring against gravity to keep the star 'alive.' An equilibrium is established between the two. But eventually, and for massive stars more rapidly, the thermonuclear fuel is exhausted. There are intermediate stages, depending on the star's mass, of the conversion of helium to carbon, to nitrogen to oxygen, all the way up the periodic table to iron, but finally for every star there comes*

*the 'end of the line.' This end is due to the fact that the conversion of iron to even heavier elements requires that the star eat up energy. And to live, the star needs to create energy.*

*This is the struggle on a cosmic scale. The star can no longer generate enough energy in its core to withstand the infall of its outer shells, and it collapses for a last time, expelling its outer shells of material. It becomes a superdense object, like a white dwarf, a neutron star, or black hole, and can generate no more energy. It shines for some time by gravitational energy stored up from its collapse, but it will soon dissipate all of the energy to become a dead piece of non-radiating mass in the universe.*

*We note that with each generation of stars, the chemical elements in the universe are being transformed from the lighter to the heavier elements. The original hydrogen of the universe is being converted in the thermonuclear furnace of the stars to helium and then to carbon, to nitrogen, to oxygen, and finally to iron. And except for bit of helium and some lighter elements made in the early hot universe, the birth and death of stars is the only means available to get the heavier elements, and so we can claim to be made of stardust.*

The next phase was the creation of the third level of angels who, along with God and the other angels, prepared for the creation of life itself. Again, God created all the natural laws of life from conception through development, reproduction and finally death before he created the first moment of life on earth. But all life, from its earliest forms and over billions of years until the 'creation' of mankind, was only material in nature, not spiritual.

Initially all reproduction of life was simply by division of cells. Once God created more complex life forms, asexual reproduction became the normal process. That process only allowed the offspring to be identical to their parents. Then, relatively early in that phase, God created bisexual reproduction in order to accomplish the development of a wide diversity of life by combining the two different genetic codes of the parents into one new offspring with its own unique genetic characteristics.

But it all would have been only limited nature if it didn't end up with the final phase, the creation of mankind – people to share in his abundant material creation. He did it for us.

I don't know how he gathered the resources and energy to trigger the Big Bang, but it happened through his intelligence, power and will. Similarly, I don't know how he formed and triggered the first forms of life but again, it happened through his intelligence, power and will. It's certain to me that it was all in accordance with the above-described natural laws of material and life sciences except for the initial and continuing supernatural actions of creation.

Because God is universal and present in his creation around the earth, he may well have created multiple life forms in multiple locations around the earth in order to not rely on the physical dispersion from a single point in order to get life established

everywhere. Each life form in each location would be the initial building block for God's continuing creation, varying in each part of the world according to his intention and will.

*The earliest known life forms on Earth are believed to be fossilized microorganisms found in hydrothermal vent precipitates, considered to be about 3.42 billion years old.* (Wikipedia) Those early life forms and even their predecessors could have existed long before those first fossilized remains were preserved for our discovery.

One of the most basic elements in all life forms is their genetics. Only God could have pre-programmed a life-governing code in such complexity yet in a microscopic portion of each and every living cell. How a cell lives, functions and multiplies is governed by its genetic code. How multiple kinds of cells can combine into complex life forms, each type of cell contributing its own role and sustaining other cells, is governed by its genetics. How a human body can have hundreds of kinds of cells encapsulated within a living membrane – blood and circulation, vital organs, brain and nervous systems communicating and directing cellular actions, bones and muscles working to structure and move the body, etc. And it all came to be from the initial zygote at conception. Only God could design and implement that all.

Another basic element (per natural laws) of nearly all life forms is **bisexual reproduction** – living male and female cells combining to form a new living entity, their offspring. Each new entity has its own unique genetic code comprised of a combination of its two parents' genetic code. **That is the basis for diversity – without which we would all be alike and just clones of our mother**.

*Sexual reproduction therefore must offer significant fitness advantages because, despite the two-fold cost of sex (see below), it dominates among multicellular forms of life, implying that the fitness of offspring produced by sexual processes outweighs the costs. Sexual reproduction derives from recombination, where parent genotypes are reorganized and shared with the offspring. This stands in contrast to single-parent asexual replication, where the offspring is always identical to the parents (barring mutation). Recombination supplies two fault-tolerance mechanisms at the molecular level: recombinational DNA repair (promoted during meiosis because homologous chromosomes pair at that time) and complementation (also known as heterosis, hybrid vigor or masking of mutations).*
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evolution_of_sexual_reproduction)

Only God could have simultaneously created (or evolved) two versions of a species, male and female, with the compatibility and capability to mate and share their genetic code to form a unique new life in their offspring. To me, it's the most compelling argument for the existence of God. Natural processes alone described by Darwin's evolutionary theory could not have jumped the hurdle from asexual reproduction to bisexual reproduction. And without it, we wouldn't exist.

The above discussion about ctenophores (**Creation– scientific version**) indicates that bisexual reproduction likely evolved very early in the process of creation but

initially in the form of hermaphrodites, single beings containing both male and female sexual features. Evolution from single bisexual beings (hermaphrodites) to separate male and female beings could have taken millions of years. But God did that in order to create the basis for furthering a diverse creation.

(But as I look at beans or apples that I grow in my garden, I see differences between individual fruits, even though they are genetically the same. That shows how the natural laws and environment also affect diversity even within the same genetics. But that's also an effect of God's hand in nature.)

So, my theory is that God somehow created the first cellular life form including its genetic code from natural raw materials, and immediately upon its creation already having the necessary ability to reproduce itself, passing along it's genetic code to its offspring. Now that's a miracle!

Once the natural genetic reproductive process was established, God could then modify that genetic code, either through directed natural processes or directly by his will, intervening during the reproductive process to enhance the offspring in the direction he desired. With unlimited intelligence and power, God created new life forms from existing living beings through their reproductive processes by modifying their genetics with each parent-offspring cycle, each step creating a more complex, diverse life form. God repeated that process over billions of years through countless reproductive cycles all over the earth from the simplest to the most complex life form – Homo sapiens; us.

To illustrate the process, God created and modified life forms by using his intellect and will and, because he is entirely spiritual, he could literally do it with his mind. And because God is a spiritual being, there's no limitation on the scale that he can work, including at the microscopic level. God could see inside the DNA code just as easily as a programmer can read computer code and then just add another minor tweak in the genetic code to modify the subsequent offspring's life form. He could significantly modify a species by very small tweaks in the genetic code over millions of reproductive cycles, consistent with Darwin's theory of evolution but through God's creative intention and power.

It's fascinating to me that God had the foresight to see where and how he intended to evolve every species through such minor modifications. And early in the process, to envision the many different types of species, both plants and animals (and many, many other tiny organisms that we don't even think of in the air, ground and water, e.g., viruses, fungi, tiny critters, etc.) Think of the diagram of all species like a large tree and how the branches formed off in whole new kinds of life forms, but all in an evolutionary process of small steps under God's creative power, intellect and will.

Another possibility that is closer to Darwin's theory of evolution, and that is adaptive behavior of all life forms to enhance their own existence according to natural laws described above, and that engrained behavior actually transforming its genetic code in some small yet significant way.

According to some resources on the internet, scientists have proven that some behaviors in animals can be artificially modified, and that modification can be passed on to their offspring which could only have been possible through some slight modification of their genetics.

It seems that we (all animals) are conceived with a specific hereditary genetic code from our parents, but that code can be modified through our formative stages by our behavior and the environment in which we develop from infancy to maturity. And any such modification is then passed on to our children. For example, I understand that treatment for alcoholism includes the premise that it is hereditary to some extent.

Our children adapt their behavior to please us or to satisfy their own well-being within the environment and culture in which they live. That also means that how we raise our children can, to some extent, affect the genetics of our grandchildren and on down the line. That's how evolution works.

As I understand it, the last step in the process from our immediate non-Homo sapiens ancestors was an increase in brain capacity and complexity. That step took our mind-base from instinct-level to intellect-level. Along with that change came free will and the first human soul, the place for the above-described natural moral laws to take hold. Of course, the level of intelligence was initially just a small step above their ancestors at the time, but it was the most significant step that 'created' mankind.

And again, God did that by modifying the genetic code in a pair of reproductive mates, male and female. God could have done that in one single male/female pairing and then spread humanity through reproduction. I understand that science holds that all humanity began with that one single pairing. But I believe that he could have started humanity in multiple locations and pairings. That would have given a much bigger step toward diversification.

It's also historically reported that the first humans and their very compatible ancestors (non-Homo sapiens) freely interbred because, at that time, there were no significant physical differences. So, the genetic pool for the early humans (Homo sapiens) expanded with a mix of multiple species. As the evolutionary process went forward, the humans out-competed their brethren and became the sole survivors – our ancestors.

God created mankind as the product and goal of his love and has been spiritually related to all humans throughout these hundreds of thousands of pre-historic years, the last tens of thousands of historical years, the last few thousands of Biblical years, recorded history, today, and forever in the future. God has been a part of every step in the development of humanity and every civilization around the world. It is my opinion that God has been, is today and always will be equally loving to all peoples, regardless of their own choices of religion or not, in this relationship.

That stands in contrast to the Judeo-Christian belief that God has exclusively chosen the Israelites and their successors, i.e., Christians, to be his own people, *"a royal*

*nation, a people set apart."* That's the basis for Catholic teaching and conservative /traditional believers are locked into that perspective; we are God's chosen people exclusively and all others are somehow outside. I'm a faithful Catholic and believe that God did in fact reveal himself through the Jewish prophets and Jesus Christ, the Son of God as written in the Bible, but my opinion is that God is inclusive of all people, not exclusively Judeo-Christian believers. I also take exception to some narratives in the Old Testament, specifically as shown above with regard to Genesis and creation.

**The human soul**

This is the most fundamental and important element of this whole picture – without an understanding of our soul, the rest of it doesn't come together. What is it? How do we get it? How does it develop and grow?

First, **we don't have a soul – we are our soul. It is who we are**. Our soul is not a part of us like a foot or kidney, it's all of us – our very life itself. Our life and our soul are one and the same. Our body goes along for the ride – it's our material and mortal vehicle; our soul is spiritual and eternal. But our body is still essential as the framework for our soul's being, a human being. Without a body, our soul would be an angel, not human. Our body's structure and appearance and characteristics are unique and express who we are. But our soul is the essence of who we are.

Our soul is commonly understood as our mind, i.e., how we think, but it's much more than that. It's the basis of our human nature that distinguishes us from all other animals. Animals have brains, some intellect, highly developed instinct and some exhibit a level of emotion. Examples of high-level brain capability are the apes, elephants, whales, porpoises, etc. The movie, *My Octopus Teacher*, is a good example of even that strange sea creature showing intellect, instinct and emotions – it's very lovely and inspiring. It's also evident in our pets; how they learn and react to us, including their affection and support for us.

But our brain is genetically at a higher level than that of animal behavior which gives us the capacity for our God-given soul. Our soul includes our intellect, our memory, our conscience and, most importantly, our free will to choose entirely based on our desires. It includes our ability to think, imagine, reason and learn. It's the basis for who we are when we speak and act, including our unique personality.

Our soul is more than just physical brain activity – molecules or electrical impulses, etc., bouncing around in our brain; it's supernatural in the sense that it's above the level associated with our animalistic body. It truly is spiritual in nature, in God's image although at a lower level, perhaps comparable to the angels. That allows us to share in God's nature, the part of our being where God's natural moral laws (see above) are found. And our God-given free will allows us to choose to reflect and exhibit those moral laws or to ignore and reject them as did Lucifer/Satan. Our choices reflect and are

recorded in our conscience for our ultimate judgment with related consequences after death.

See more below for a discussion about how we got our soul in the first place.

Our soul is naturally linked with our brain, the place where our intellect, knowledge and memory function. Generally, our soul grows and develops along with our brain from the womb, through infancy, childhood, adolescence, and maturity. It learns and grows from our physical experiences and interactions with those around us, initially our parents, families and friends and expanding with our teachers, neighbors, and community.

In one sense, our soul is based on the past, limited by our experience and knowledge up to our current point in time. It can't be what it hasn't yet experienced, what it will become in the future that hasn't yet happened. I'm the same person at age 83 as I was at age 6 but my soul has greatly expanded with experience and knowledge and memory, but I don't yet have an experience of the future as a part of whom I am today.

But the most God-like nature of our soul is our intellect. Once we have a reasonable level of knowledge and experience, our soul has the ability to conceive and create new ideas and concepts and solutions that we have not yet known or experienced. It can go beyond our current level.

It's important to note that our intellect, like I said above about our soul, can only move ahead based on the knowledge and experience that it has already been given. Yes, we can imagine things that we don't know about but even our imagination starts from its basis of knowledge, experience and memory.

Scientists, engineers, artists, musicians, writers, etc., express our God-given creative nature. Without that ability, we would still be living in caves and eating wild berries. Our entire civilization exists because of that unique human ability of our souls to advance beyond our current level of knowledge and experience. And that's our God-given nature - thank God!

The history of the human race for hundreds of thousand years documents our God-given nature in the continued development of our society in every way – physical environment, cultural languages and expressions, scientific knowledge, technology of all kinds, etc. Like I said above, without it, we'd still be living in caves. Without our God-given souls, none of that would have been possible.

**How did we get our souls?**

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) says the following regarding the human soul:

355 *"God created man in his own image, in the image of God, he created him; male and female he created them."* (Genesis 1:27) *In his own nature, he unites the spiritual and material worlds.*

356 *He is the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake, and he alone is called to share, by knowledge and love, in God's own life.*

357 *He is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons.*

362 *The human person, created in the image of God, is a being at once corporeal and spiritual.*

363 *The term 'soul' often refers to human life or the entire human person. But, 'soul' also refers to the innermost aspect of man, that which is of greatest value to him,*

365 *It is because of its spiritual soul that the body made of matter becomes a living, human body; spirit and matter; in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature.*

366 *The Church teaches that* ***every spiritual soul is created immediately by God – it is not 'produced' by the parents*** *– and also that it is immortal: it does not perish when it separates from the body at death, and it will be reunited with the body at the final Resurrection.* (my emphasis)

I disagree with that last statement in bold. The Church's teaching is that God directly infuses a soul into every single human being that has ever or will ever live, at the moment of their conception – the parents produced the cellular matter, i.e., zygote, but God imparted the individual, unique soul for it. That places God in the middle of every single sexual act between a man and woman in the history of mankind, married or not, one-night stands, drunk or sober, consensual or not, rape and incest included, whether conception was accomplished or not.

I don't believe God works that way. God created the natural laws of biological reproduction and doesn't interfere with or direct a particular outcome – he lets the natural processes do their job. Sometimes that works perfectly, but in many cases, there are natural malfunctions, genetically or gestationally, but I believe that God doesn't direct those malfunctions either. Similarly, he doesn't direct the soul's outcome and allows the natural processes before and after birth to determine one's soul.

That statement in bold would also make God the 'creator' of and directly responsible for every 'soul' that has ever lived, including the most saintly people, e.g., Mother Teresa, et al, but also the most evil people, e.g., Hitler, Stalin, et al. It also borders on pre-destination which I totally disagree with. Both the good and the bad have their place in history due to their own free will and choice to follow God or Satan, not because God created them that way at conception. Otherwise, God would be placed in the position of whom to favor and whom to disfavor, and to bear the responsibility for the good or bad results, but again, God doesn't work that way.

Further, if that were objectively true, it would hold that God intentionally created LGBTQI+ people individually, each and every one. And it certainly would make them all God's children and contradict the conservative argument that *'God created them, male and female'* (Genesis 1:27) as exclusively binary. But then Genesis is not

objectively true. It's another example of intersubjective truth, believed by many, including the Church. LGBTQ people are a natural result of God-created diversity which is much more complicated than the simple binary male/female definition would have it.

It seems to me that the whole framework for LGBTQ was established in the animal kingdom long before humans evolved, and we inherited it from our ancestors; it didn't just start in someone's mind a few thousand years ago. The first time I started realizing this was in reading Darwin's *Origin of the Species* where he talked about hermaphrodites in animals (look it up) – animals with both male and female sexual features. Now, in humans, it's called 'intersex'. I believe that it's all just a genetic variation that God included in the diversity of his creation. In hermaphrodites or intersex, it's expressed physically in multiple or varying genital configurations of both male and female sexes. LGBTQ sexual identity is expressed in the brain and soul in a similar manner. It's a natural phenomenon whether God intended that outcome or if he just allowed the natural processes of genetics and reproduction to produce that outcome.

I certainly agree that God created mankind as described above but that he created the dual nature of man – body and soul, and then allowed the natural laws and processes that he created to bring man and woman together for procreation of human beings, including their souls. I believe that our innermost nature of who we are, our soul, is at least partly a product of our heritage from our parents and ancestors, somehow based within our genetics.

To follow up on that idea, look online about genetics of the human soul and you'll find a number of resources, mostly in the context of psychology. That word/science is based on the word 'psyche' which refers directly to the human soul (without calling it that). One of those sources says: *30% to 60% of your personality is inheritable. Research also suggests that significant personality changes tend to occur between ages 20 to 40.*
(https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/is-your-personality-genetic#personality-timeline)

That may include both good and bad genetic outcomes. Much of psychology is directed toward the bad side, psychological disorders of many kinds, and it's been shown that some of those disorders are in fact passed on genetically. For example, I've long understood that many in the medical/psychology field teach that alcoholism is an inherited characteristic.

Our soul is necessarily linked to our brain which is entirely based on genetics at conception, although neither the brain nor the soul exists at that moment. I believe that it's when the embryo develops a real, functional brain that we can actually have a soul. Prior to that, it's all just potential. The foundation for it is there in the DNA, but it's not yet developed.

Beyond our genetics, our soul develops in our natural environment – in the womb and from the mother's own environment, then after birth in the interaction with our

parents, immediate family and others around us, followed by our teachers and others involved in our physical and mental development. It's influenced by those around us and the environment we live in.

The above-mentioned studies talk about some of the bad disorders being based on abusive or otherwise negative environments in those early formation years. Presumably, good environments will result in good children being formed, but not necessarily.

Another component of the development of our soul is our own free will, the choices we make, the friends and others whom we choose (or not) to be associated with, the habits we develop both good and bad, the careers we pursue, etc. Science says that those lifestyle habits become ingrained within us and actually can physically modify our genetic characteristics which can then be passed on to future generations.

So, our soul continues to develop over our lifetime; it's not fixed because we have a choice and can change it. We can learn new lifestyles, develop new habits, change our behavior, etc., some for the good but also, we can choose the bad. And some of those bad choices can impact on our psyche, our soul, such as drug and alcohol abuse.

Similarly, some can choose to be truly evil. The human race includes the entire spectrum from good to evil. Why or how do they become evil? The same process described above applies to all – genetics, the environment we are raised and educated in, the people we associate with, the choices we make and the habits we develop, good or bad.

And the way the soul develops is very significant when we talk about abortion. What is the state of the soul of a zygote or embryo or fetus at the time of an abortion? Is it the same as a fully developed, full term baby? Or something less? The conservative point of view stated above is that the soul is infused by God at the moment of conception which is the basis for denying any and all abortions. If the soul is developed over time by natural processes, it may or may not have been formed at the time of abortion. If the soul is just potential as I state above, is it morally okay to abort? If a pregnancy is medically inviable, e.g., ectopic, does that make a difference from a moral standpoint?

As I wrote this, the headline news was that the Alabama Supreme Court had ruled that a zygote in an IVF freezer is the same as a child and has the same protections under state law, holding that damage or destruction of such zygote is liable as taking a life. In the particular case, someone accidentally destroyed a batch of frozen zygotes, and the plaintiffs wanted the IVF facility held responsible; the Court ruled in their favor.

So, to make it more complicated, is the soul of a zygote in the uterus or fallopian tube or freezer the same? Or can the doctors treat them differently from a medical or moral standpoint?

I don't think we really know the status of the soul at any point before viability outside the womb. We know that very premature babies do survive and develop into a person, so they enjoy all the moral and legal protections. We know that some or maybe many embryos will develop fatal complications and result in miscarriage at any point of

pregnancy so they will never develop into a person with such rights. So, is the moral line determined at viability? The ultimate judgment is God's alone; we just can't really know. But I do believe that God will look at each case individually, what and why, the personal choice of the mother-to-be, the medical professional opinion, etc., not just a blanket black and white yes or no.

Our soul is entirely spiritual, not physical but, while we're alive, it's somehow inextricably linked to our brain – our thoughts, memories, intellect and will. We get that spiritual nature with our physical nature when we are conceived. While the body is alive, the two can't be separated; you can't have one without the other. It is 'who we are' and determines our physical nature, appearance, and our mental being.

It's still a personal gift from God, a share in his own spiritual nature that ties us to himself and vice versa. We don't have a choice because we can't live without it. And because of its spiritual nature, our soul will live on into eternity after the death of our body.

My understanding at this point is that our ancient predecessors were not 'human', hence they did not have a 'soul' as we know it – a spiritual life in addition to a physical life. Following my above thinking, I believe that the human soul was slowly introduced by God through the continual enhancement of our brain's genetic makeup over thousands of generations. As our brain and cognitive functions continued to be improved by God, he added free will and a conscience to our nature. And that combination of free will and conscience is the essence of a soul because that's when humans first had the ability to choose between good and bad behavior, and to be held accountable for it. Prior to that, human actions were the same as animals, simply natural with no moral context.

At that point, our ancestors would have had the fundamentals of what we now know as virtues and sins, but they would not yet have a developed framework for morality. The first humans would still have behaved like their own ancestors who didn't have souls, just with a higher brain capacity than just animalistic instincts.

I believe that God could have directly instilled a fully developed soul with spiritual nature and conscience into the first 'humans', but it seems more logical that he developed it over time along with the improvements of the human brain because it's so connected to the functionality of the brain. The soul of the first humans may have been comparably simple in the early stages of development and became more mature as subsequent generations developed higher levels of intellect and will with the improved ability to discern good from bad, right from wrong.

That also leads me to understand that our soul, like our brain, is comprised of both conscious and subconscious elements. Our physical brain runs our living body almost entirely in its subconscious nature – we don't have a consciousness about it unless we stop to think. Many bodily functions have no conscious control whatsoever, they're entirely subconscious, e.g., we can't choose to start or stop our heartbeat or digestion, etc. Also, many of our chosen actions are managed subconsciously once we make a

conscious decision to the goal of that action, e.g., walking. Athletes develop highly trained bodies that perform fantastically yet largely subconsciously or instinctively, i.e., they don't have the time or the need to think about what their body is doing.

Our soul is somehow connected to our genetic code (DNA) in a way that makes each soul uniquely matched to our physical body – appearance, abilities, brain functions, etc. The life of our soul after death is still uniquely us, who and what we really are as in our physical body. And as described above, our soul is both conscious and subconscious in this physical life but fully and only conscious after death. That enables the soul of an infant that dies before or after birth, and small children who died but have not yet had the life experiences, to further develop their soul, to still attain a fully developed soul through their life after death.

I think that a lot of our personal character is embedded in our soul subconsciously. Some of that is directly linked to our genetic heritage – it came from our parents and other ancestors. Even the part of us that we've acquired after our birth is stored in our subconscious. How we talk (e.g., with accents), move, react, etc. is largely subconscious, part of our soul.

God's natural moral laws described above, form in that subconscious part of our soul. But the morality of an act requires conscious knowledge of right and wrong as well as the will to act upon it, one way or the other. Morality comes from the position of having free will to choose between good and bad, literally following God or Satan. It's entirely spiritual in nature even though it may involve the body in carrying out the chosen actions.

Given that we really do live in both the physical and spiritual worlds, the subconscious part of our soul exists in both the physical and spiritual realms. The spiritual realm is where and how we get inspiration from God as well as temptation from Satan. We have a lot of connection to the spiritual world around us but it's entirely subconscious – we don't consciously sense or perceive it.

Our soul mirrors and records our conscious brain activities – our intellect and knowledge, our experience and our memory, our thoughts and our emotions, our communications and our considerations, and certainly our acts of free will. Everything that we think and do in our entire life is permanently recorded in our soul for future and ultimate judgment with appropriate reward or punishment. Like our digital lives, it's stored in the 'cloud' for later access and processing.

To make this line of thinking more complex, how do we explain or understand some individuals with extraordinary talents and skills that seem to be God-given, perhaps even supernatural in themselves? A few examples to think about – Mozart and Beethoven, De Vinci and Michelangelo, savants such as Kim Peek, aka *Rain Man* (movie). Do they show strong evidence of God's hand at work in their souls or are they just natural outcomes of genetic variation? I don't know yet.

Another area of our spiritual nature to consider is mental health. I don't know a lot about it, but I do know that it's complex and has a lot of variations, in some cases extreme. Is that a God-given spiritual nature in the soul or is it another form of genetic variation? Or does it derive from or change because of other internal or external causes? Environmental? Drugs?

**Soul of the unborn**

The core of the Church's pro-life argument against abortion is that a human soul already exists in the zygote at the moment of conception and subsequent embryo/fetus. So, the real question is – is there actually a human soul present in the zygote or blastocyst or embryo or fetus? If not, it's a lesser moral issue because it's just a small cluster of living cells within the mother's body or in the IVF freezer. If not, at that point it's just a potential human body and soul, but not yet a real 'person'. And abortion would not be as serious – it would be intervening in a potential life but not killing a person, perhaps no more harmful than a miscarriage depending on the circumstances and intent.

The Catholic Church's explicit teaching is that the human soul is *"created immediately by God – it is not 'produced' by the parents"* (CCC 366), at the moment of conception. (see above for my discussion about that premise) This teaching is supported by conservative Christians, but not all Christians (e.g., liberals, et al), people of other faiths and people no particular faith.

If there is, in fact, a human soul in the initial zygote, then the Church and like-minded pro-life groups and individuals insist that it must be treated with all the same legal protections as a newborn baby. Under that premise, terminating the life of the zygote at any point of time after conception (embryo/fetus) is akin to murder and should be prohibited. That's also the core of the Alabama Supreme Court finding (with explicit reference to conservative religious teaching) that frozen zygotes in the IVF process are persons under the law.

**So, let's talk about the soul of the unborn.**

At the moment of conception, there is no objective evidence of a soul that we can see or measure other than the zygote is 'alive' and functioning, the potential (but not yet certain) beginning stage of pregnancy. For the Church and conservatives, that's proof enough that the soul already exists – if it's 'alive', therefore it has a soul. The premise is entirely subjective with no real evidence, believed by many but also denied by many others.

If true, it means that, if the zygote 'dies' two seconds later or two days later or two weeks later, for any reason, the eternal soul of that 'person' would enter eternal spiritual nature in a manner known only to God but, according to conservative Christianity, it could not go to heaven because it had not been baptized. But it would have avoided all the good and bad things that happen to real people throughout life. It certainly would

have avoided all pain and suffering as well as the potential of going to hell – not a bad outcome.

So, who is that deceased 'person' and what would its new nature be? It never had a moment of what we typically understand as a soul – no intellect, no memory, no experience, etc., entirely undeveloped. As I said above, a soul can only be what it has experienced, not something in its future that hasn't yet happened. It would be more like an angel than a human because it never had a developed body. Would its genetics (or spiritual equivalent) provide the framework for a spiritual body to develop in life after death? It would have to fully develop somehow, or it wouldn't be able to enjoy the benefits of eternal life. If it did fully develop, it still would never have experienced a real human life, only spiritual life (again like an angel).

If that's all true, what would happen to that soul in an IVF situation, 'conceived' by medical staff in a petri dish in a lab and then frozen a few moments later. That's a dilemma for conservatives and why they oppose IVF anyway, because that zygote was 'conceived' by illicit means, not 'natural' reproduction of a man and woman having sex. But, if the premise is true, there is a real human soul in that microscopic cluster of cells in the petri dish that is then subjected to being frozen. Would that soul then just be suspended in life like the living cells, or would it enter the spiritual world to wait for, if and when, the cluster of cells to be thawed and implanted in a woman's womb and then reconnect to the developing 'body'?

What would happen to that soul if the implantation didn't work? Or if the cluster of cells was not viable or had other medical abnormalities and could never survive? That would be similar to the above discussion about the zygote dying inside the womb.

As I was writing this section, the following popped up in my news feed: (by Beth Ann Mayer, see Bibliography):

*The embryonic phase is when most pregnancy losses occur, though giving precise numbers is challenging. Research from 2015 found it's been estimated that up to 50% of zygotes* (with or without souls) *don't become blastocysts, though a person likely hasn't even taken a pregnancy test at this point.*

*"Many miscarriages occur without the mother realizing they were pregnant, so it is difficult to determine what percentage of pregnancies," Dr. Parr says.*

*One 2013 study indicated the odds of pregnancy loss at week 5 were 21.3%, and the odds dropped to 5% after the sixth week, although these risks vary by factors including race* (again even before the woman may realize that she's actually pregnant).

*"These miscarriages are typically due to abnormal chromosomes about half the time," Dr. Kiefer says. "Many times, we never find out the reason for the loss."*

So, from the conservative viewpoint, all these failures to implant or very early miscarriages result in a human soul passing into eternal life. Is that supported by any real evidence or is it just a subjective matter of religious faith?

But if the soul is not present at conception, when and how does it become a real part of the human-to-be? That's the hard part because we have no objective evidence or way to distinguish whether the soul is present or not. It's a subjective argument without evidence either way. If you can't really tie down when the soul becomes present, it's easier to hold that it's present from the beginning.

Again, while I was writing this, another recently published article argues this point more definitively. Bradley Onishi wrote, *Why 'Life Begins at Conception' Is Less Christian Than You Think*. (see Bibliography for link) He wrote: *The idea that life begins at conception is neither a unanimous belief in the history of Christianity, nor a classic American Protestant doctrine*. Mr. Onishi is a much more qualified writer than I. (see https://www.bradonishi.com/)

To further evaluate that article, I reviewed a discussion on Wikipedia: "*History of Christian thought on abortion*." It begins with: *Christianity and abortion has a long and complex history. There is scholarly disagreement on how early Christians felt about abortion. Some scholars have concluded that early Christians took a nuanced stance on what is now called abortion, and that at different and in separate places early Christians have taken different stances.* It goes on to elaborate on those different stances and shows that it's been an argument for thousands of years with stances on both sides based on when they believe the soul is formed in the fetus, at conception or later.

*Augustine believed that an early abortion is not murder because, according to the Aristotelian concept of delayed ensoulment, the soul of a fetus at an early stage is not present, a belief that passed into canon law. Nonetheless, he harshly condemned the procedure.*

*Thomas Aquinas and Pope Innocent III also believed that a fetus does not have a soul until "quickening," or when the fetus begins to kick and move, and therefore early abortion was not murder, though later abortion was. Aquinas held that abortion was still wrong, even when not murder, regardless of when the soul entered the body. Pope Stephen V and Pope Sixtus V opposed abortion at any stage of pregnancy.* (Wikipedia)

So, you could equally argue that the real human soul begins, more or less, at viability or live birth and then develops along with the development of the brain. (see my above discussion) It would have had only the limited experience of life in the womb but now would have the full potential of personhood, a real functioning body. If you hold that belief, as some religions do, then abortion before viability would again be intervening in a potential life but not killing a person. Also, there would be no need for speculation about what would happen to the soul with all that ambiguity.

That makes sense outside of the conservative Catholic/Christianity point of view. And it makes the whole argument about abortion one of conservatives insisting on imposing their religious viewpoint on everyone else, of other religions or no religion at all.

Again, the Church holds that everyone must be baptized before going to heaven. Carrying that premise into this discussion, it holds that any unborn soul as well as the soul of any infant or young child that dies but is not yet baptized cannot go to heaven even though they never sinned. To explain what happens to that innocent soul, the Church many years ago developed the idea of 'limbo', an undefined spiritual nature, perhaps similar to purgatory, where unbaptized souls go, still less than the fulness of heaven. The Catechism (1261) doesn't call it limbo anymore but just says, *"As regards children who have died without Baptism, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God --- and allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism."* That premise would also apply to all souls of the deceased unborn as discussed above.

My old, 1949 *Baltimore Catechism* says that Jesus' spirit went to 'limbo' while his body remained in the tomb, *"to announce to the souls waiting there the joyful news that He had reopened heaven to mankind."* Under that idea, all the good souls of hundreds of thousands of years from all over the world before that moment in real time were held in 'limbo' until Jesus reopened heaven. But they were not baptized so God must have waived the baptismal rule for them? Then, why not for innocent unborn souls and children?

Another kind of question – did the soul of the unborn exist in any form or manner before conception? To argue that it existed before conception is similar to believing in reincarnation, i.e., a previously living soul that is 'reincarnated' within the newly conceived zygote. Many people, including some religions, believe in reincarnation just as much as conservative Christians believe the above. I've read about some very interesting cases where that seems to be objectively true – real people who have experienced a previous life.

But all this isn't just a philosophical discussion about the arguable status of the unborn soul; it's also about the physical and mental health care of the woman who is carrying the zygote, whether it has as soul yet or not. It's about a pregnancy that will require a great deal of medical care and place a significant mental and psychological load on a woman who may or may not want it. Does God care more about the <u>potential</u> life of the zygote or the very real needs of the woman? God loves every woman very much, especially mothers and mothers-to-be. To argue that God loves the zygote more is at best questionable or illogical.

As discussed under the section on **Free will**, the Catechism states emphatically that we must respect and support the right of free will so we should also respect and protect the right of a pregnant woman to decide what's best for herself and her family. God may or may not agree with the woman, but he gave her the right to choose for herself and will deal with the consequences after looking at her entire life, not just her decision about her pregnancy.

To not only deny the mother-to-be's free choice in one of the most important decisions of her lifetime, but to also deny her necessary medical care for the sake of the zygote is morally wrong. The harm that is being done by conservative religious, legislative and legal leaders is more than morally wrong; it's vindictive and malicious. Especially when it comes from a sense of moral superiority.

## CHOICES AND CONSEQUENCES

Based on the above real framework of God and heaven, Satan and hell, with purgatory in between, and the fact of life after death, we can now address Choices and Consequences.

Our human choices are both physical and spiritual in nature although some are entirely in our mind. We make significant and insignificant choices all the time. Every conscious moment of our mind involves choices – what to think and do. Even while we are doing some things, our mind can literally be doing something else – thinking about it. If we are conscious, we are almost constantly thinking about something.

Our choices literally define who we are by how we behave, talk and think. They are expressions of our mind and will. They come from inside of us, i.e., from our soul. We can hide them from others, but we can't from ourselves. Our memory records them and our conscience judges them.

Our choices of behavior, including our thoughts, reflect the above natural moral laws or virtues, God-given laws, and man-made laws, both for and against, as well as the choices that we make to go about our daily lives. The good and bad things that we do are the direct result of choices we make. And they are all recorded for posterity in our souls for later review after death.

Our choices are generally good, bad, or neutral with respect to our life after death. Probably most of our choices are neutral; it's the fewer good and bad choices that have a direct impact on our ultimate outcome – heaven or hell, or purgatory in between. The good choices reflect the above-described virtues and the more, the better. Good behavior will ultimately have a good outcome, i.e., life in heaven, with perhaps some time in purgatory for preparation for heaven.

Our good choices, large and small, should be our primary objective – to always do good. Or as the doctors' motto says, 'do no harm.' Good choices lead to good outcomes and ultimately to heaven. We can't get there without them.

While it may seem that neutral choices or actions don't affect our ultimate outcome, they do in fact affect our life after death because they don't lead to heaven but something less, i.e., purgatory with its own consequences. That's not necessarily bad but it's not great and could be punishing. And it's not necessary because we can turn neutral acts into good acts just by our attitude about them – do them for good reasons and do a good job of them. People became saints by turning everyday, small, insignificant actions into works for God's purpose.

Similarly, we can turn neutral acts into bad choices if we do so for bad reasons or attitudes.

It's the bad choices that we need to be greatly concerned about because the consequences for bad behavior could indeed be very bad, painful and eternal suffering – life in hell itself.

The problem is that we mostly don't see or are aware of those ultimate consequences when we are making bad choices. The reason for that is also in the nature of our soul. We have a constant push and pull between good and bad behavior. We are moved toward bad choices because Satan flips the script and makes good things seem bad and bad things seem good. We see something as desirable without thinking that it's bad with negative consequences. In fact, if Satan has his way, we see it as good and make the choice to go for it.

I don't believe that anyone 'chooses' to go to hell; that's unrealistic. I understand that people make choices that may take them to hell, but they are choosing something for its perceived pleasure, good or benefit, not connecting that choice with going to hell. Satan works by convincing people that bad is good in some way or another and they choose that perceived good with no intention of the bad consequences. I don't believe that Hitler or Stalin chose to go to hell, but they seemingly got that outcome.

Another choice that seemingly many people make is literally complacency –not making a positive effort to do better. They don't realize the significance of 'doing nothing' in terms of life after death. They could do many little things to improve their eventual outcome but choose not to make the effort.

More about consequences later – heaven, hell and purgatory.

**So, why should you go to church?**

One of the significant choices you can make about life after death is whether to go to church or not. If you can eventually go to heaven without it, why should you go to church? It's all about reducing the distance between yourself and God here in this life before death. You have the opportunity and ability now to improve your status on the stairway to heaven.

As I've said in other places, God is always with us, each and everyone, but we are not always connected to him by our own free choice. We can turn to God at anytime, anywhere, not just in church. *But, for where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.* (Mt 18:20) And church is where those so inclined gather to be with God. It's an act of free will to commit some time exclusively to be with God. To pray, to worship, to learn, to receive God's grace, etc.

There's a relationship between this discussion and the chapter about Consciousness above. God is consciousness, everywhere and with everyone. But for a person to elevate their own consciousness to God requires some effort and some help from God. Going to church can be a way to help do that. It's a way to get your physical

senses – sight and hearing, and your physical responses to raise your mental and spiritual consciousness, which in turn, raises you closer to God's presence.

But just going to church physically won't make a lot of difference if you don't go to church spiritually. You can be just an observer but it's more beneficial if you're a participant in some way. Your mind may wander but be as attentive as possible to make the most of it. You may learn something beneficial. It can also be a part of your growth in the love of God. Why? Because it's self-discipline to make a positive difference instead of being indifferent staying at home.

Going to church shows God that you acknowledge your relationship and increases your participation in that relationship. It provides an opportunity to show gratitude to God for his blessings in your life as well as seeking his help in your struggles. It will be a source of grace if you let it. But you have to choose to let God into your life. *Knock and the door will be opened to you.* (Mt 7:7)

Becoming active in your church and participating in any ministries is a way to work for God and his mission to love and serve others, especially those in need of God's help. God works through people, and you can be part of that work. In doing so, you will gain grace for yourself and those whom you serve.

Which church? The one that best helps you grow closer to God. All may be pathways to God, but they are also all managed by people and not all are perfect (as you can see in my writing this book). Christian churches are based on the authentic relationship to Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The Bible is an authentic (though also not entirely perfect) gift of God to his people. My writing includes critique of the Catholic Church but it's still my Church for many reasons. But I recognize that many don't accept it for many other reasons. Choose the one that's best for you and then make the most of it.

The Catholic Church is very large and broad with many, many different ministries and liturgies but the most central liturgy of the Church is holy Mass, which is celebrated around the world, every day, literally continuously somewhere. And the core of the Mass is the Eucharist given to us by Jesus himself at the Last Supper. Catholics firmly believe (as I do) that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist which we receive. Yes, you have to believe but if it's true, that's as close to God as you can get in this life, and literally a precursor of life to come after death, i.e., communion with God. I offer my own prayers every day, with, in and through the holy sacrifice of the Mass' wherever it's being celebrated at the time.

But I know that alone doesn't make you better. Catholics, including priests, et al, leave Mass after receiving Christ himself and may be still as sinful as anyone else. You still must avoid sin. And remember, Satan doesn't want you to go to church and will do everything he can to keep you from it. You have to choose to make it effective.

## Prayer

The simplest way to turn normal or neutral, everyday acts into good acts that not only benefit your own eternal outcome but also benefit those around you, is through prayer. If you believe in God and want to eventually live in heaven, just turn your mind purposefully to God and talk to him in whatever way you feel comfortable. It's an act of love and respect that brings you closer to God. Tell him that you are doing these things for him or for others whom you love or care for. Ask God for his guidance and help with your choices. Do them for the right reasons. Prayer is a choice; God doesn't force you to do it.

Like going to church, above, prayer is another way to raise your own consciousness to God. The objective of prayer is to make that connection, with and through your consciousness.

You don't have to 'pray' formal, written prayers but they've been used by millions of people for thousands of years; not a bad place to start. If you wish, you can find lots of prayers on the internet. I've included a few at the very end to use, if you'd like.

I frequently pray in love and thanksgiving to God for his abundant blessings for me and my loved ones. I pray every day for all of my loved ones – families, relatives, friends, neighbors and colleagues, past and present, alive and deceased. I pray that God will guide and support, care and protect them. I pray for all those suffering here and around the world. I pray for all those who are following Satan and are doing so much harm to others. I pray for all these before myself and trust God to take care of me.

## Sin

The Church's teaching and common understanding is that bad behavior is 'sinful'. The Catechism's description of sin: *an offense against God as well as a fault against reason, truth and right conscience. Sin is a deliberate thought, word, deed or omission contrary to the eternal law of God* (**Natural moral laws** and **God-given moral laws** as described above). *In judging the gravity of sin, it is customary to distinguish between mortal and venial sins.*

CCC 1857: *For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must together be met: Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter, and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent.*

CCC 1860: *Sin committed through malice, by deliberate choice of evil, is the gravest.*

Without defining them specifically, venial sins are all those offenses and negligences against moral laws that don't fit the above definition of mortal sin. They may be as simple as a bad thought about someone or a swear word or minor shoplifting, etc. Venial sins still have a negative effect on our soul. They condition us to lower moral standards and may make us more open to graver sins. They further distance us from God and take us closer to Satan.

Non-Christians and people of other faith or no particular faith may not agree with the distinction of mortal or venial sin, but human nature understands that some bad things are relatively minor and others significantly wrong. Our current society has stretched the boundaries of right and wrong with many fundamentally bad things now being socially acceptable, even in public, such as lying, cursing, anger or hate. Some even justify violence as a necessary good.

Another distinction to be made is whether a sin is objectively wrong or subjectively wrong. For example, an unjust war or crime against humanity would be seen by most people as objectively wrong – that's just common sense. Yet, Putin is now conducting an unjust war with many crimes against innocent people while he and others somehow believe that it's justified. Lessor examples are more subjective because the degree of harm is interpreted differently by individuals. Or some things that were previously seen as right may now be seen as wrong, e.g., Discovery Doctrine described above in **Man-made moral laws**.

## Forgiveness

Catholic doctrine teaches that mortal sin completely breaks us away from God and literally condemns such soul to hell unless it is forgiven in confession. It's like self-excommunication from God. For Catholics, the Church offers and encourages people to go to confession regularly but particularly requires it for mortal sins before other sacraments can be received.

I accept that doctrine as I practice my Catholic faith but my problem with it is that it makes no provision for God's forgiveness of non-Catholics. Are they all condemned with no means of forgiveness? I believe that God's forgiveness is not limited by Catholic practice but that it's somehow available to all people of good will and conscience. For example, Jesus prayed for his executioners, *"Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."* (Mt 23:34) To me, that means that Jesus, himself, forgave his non-Christian persecutors. Did that forgiveness extend to the Jewish leaders who pressed his execution or to Pilate who condemned him or the soldiers who crucified him? We don't know but it seems all of them "knew not what they do."

The key to forgiveness by God is that it's individually personal and requires the sinner to acknowledge their wrong, accept responsibility for it and make any reparations necessary to correct it. It also must include a conversion of heart and soul regarding that grave sin. That certainly includes asking God for forgiveness but might also mean asking the person offended or society for forgiveness. If someone met those criteria, I would think that God would forgive them, regardless of their religion or lack of it.

Forgiveness is necessary for our ultimate salvation. We must have a clean and holy soul to enter heaven. We cannot escape responsibility for our bad choices, and vice versa, we will be rewarded for our good ones. That's God's justice. It's 'pay me now or pay me later.'

But no matter how we understand it, none of us can limit God's love, mercy and forgiveness as he judges human hearts.

Forgiveness is a virtue closely tied to love, the most important virtue. One who receives forgiveness receives love from the forgiver. One who seeks forgiveness should be doing so out of love for the person offended, be that God or our brothers and sisters.

Jesus addressed forgiveness in Mt 18:21-22: *Then Peter approaching asked him, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus answered, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times."*

Jesus also taught us to pray *"Our Father who art in heaven, --- forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; ---"* (Mt 6:9-13) There are many other lessons about forgiveness in the Bible. The Catechism of the Catholic Church also includes many lessons on forgiveness. It needs to be part of who we are, both giving and receiving.

**Suffering**

Not commonly thought of in this whole picture of life after death is the role of suffering. The best example is that Jesus, himself, suffered a most cruel torture and death for the forgiveness of our sins. He said, "*whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me."* (Mt 10:38) He spoke many times about accepting persecution and warned his followers that they should expect it which they did in fact receive. Throughout his ministry, he healed the sick and suffering of all kinds. Suffering plays a very significant role in our salvation and God is very attuned to it.

The evening news is filled with the suffering of people around the world: major disasters of all kinds, war, persecution, violence, hunger and lack of medical resources, etc. The list is broad and unending, including the suffering in many various forms that each one of us endures. Many suffer from sexual abuse or other physical or mental abuse. Unfortunately, it's a large part of the human condition, a part of our God-given nature.

The Church teaches that suffering is a direct consequence of sin, specifically referring to Adam and Eve's 'original' sin which brought about mortality and suffering. The flip version of that teaching would be that there would be no suffering if it weren't for sin, original or otherwise. I don't believe that philosophy. I believe that God created the world we live in to be a very dangerous and harmful environment from many points of view. Almost every natural thing out there can cause us suffering and/or death. Suffering is a completely natural part of our life and mortality. (Remember, nature is an extension of God.) And then God gave mankind free will, including the option to cause harm and suffering to others.

But, yes, in many cases, suffering is the direct result of sin itself from the evil within mankind: one person upon another, one culture or race upon another, one nation upon another as we see in the news every day now. Suffering, in many cases, is the consequence of sin of someone or many or whole societies. This is actually due to Satan who conceives and drives hatred, violence and abuse. Satan is behind and encourages

dictators and drug lords and serial killers, etc. Satan is the instigator of domestic violence, rape and shootings. Suffering of many is the direct effect of the sins of others under the influence of Satan. While not all suffering is due to evil, all evil causes suffering, even if just to the evil person themself.

But what about the suffering inflicted by religions themselves – Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, et al? We've seen examples throughout history and it's still happening right now. Their seemingly intent is that they are doing so in God's name, e.g., Muslim terrorists shouting, *Allahu Akbar* (or *Allah Akbar*), *"God is great,"* while they kill innocent people or worse (I don't want to even describe some of those atrocities). (See **Whose rules does God judge by?** above for some examples of the Church's historical violent policies and practices.) Are those examples of God's work or Satan's? Is the answer just up to each religion or does God judge them by their works? It seems that inflicting suffering on others is Satan's work, no matter if you believe you are doing it in God's name.

The most effective countermeasure to suffering of all kinds is love; individual's love for one another, cultures or race's love for one another, nation's love for one another. And again, that love can be expressed in many different ways, but all resulting in the care for the needs of those suffering.

The other point is the subsequent consequences of suffering after death that is also a direct result of either the love that is shown or the suffering that is given. Everyone is ultimately judged for all eternity based on the love or absence of love in their own lives. And the consequences for those who have inflicted suffering on others in all its forms are going to be held accountable for their own share in it. (see **Justice** above) Some suffering, such as under Hitler and many other brutal dictators, is the direct result of their personal leadership and control, so I would guess that eternal punishment is fitting. Some, such as politicians, share indirectly for suffering due to their actions or inactions, what they have supported or restricted, and should ultimately be held accountable.

It is my premise of God's justice that every measure of suffering that is a result of someone's actions, be that one or many, will be equally inflicted upon the perpetrator(s) who caused or allowed it. That perspective gives me a framework for watching the evening news where I see so much suffering.

To the extent that suffering is from natural causes, e.g., storms, earthquakes, drought, viruses and illness of all kinds, etc., they are all part of God's creation and nature. I don't believe that God causes suffering directly because of his love and mercy for those who do suffer, but that he allows suffering as part of the whole natural process of our salvation.

As I wrote this paragraph in August 2023, the people of Hawaii suffered from the catastrophic fires that destroyed the town of Lahaina on Maui. Regardless of the cause of the initial fires, natural or man-made, the natural winds turned a blaze into an inferno that tore through the town, destroying everything and everyone in its path. It's hard to

imagine a more horrific suffering than being burned alive, even if that suffering was cut short by a speedy death.

The bottom line is that suffering is an offset for sin, directly or indirectly, as shown by Christ's crucifixion. But suffering isn't inflicted as a direct or equal measure against the sins of the person who is suffering. For example, in John 9:1-3, Jesus is asked, *"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him."* The man's blindness was not due to sin, but to show God's 'works.' In Matthew 9:2, Jesus healed the paralytic by first saying, *"Courage, child, your sins are forgiven"* and then, *"Rise, pick up your stretcher, and go home."*

Unfortunately, but somehow according to God's creation and plan for us, suffering is not justly distributed relative to sin in our lifetime here on earth. Sometimes the harshest sinners don't receive just punishment in this life and some who suffer greatly do not deserve it. That's why life after death becomes the time and place for justice – punish those who deserve it and reward those who suffer unjustly, through God's love and mercy.

Similarly, suffering is literally a part of every pathway to heaven, directly or through purgatory. Suffering offsets sin in the judgment of our soul after death. It's not the only factor, but a significant one. Again, through God's love, mercy and justice, it will all balance out.

All suffering is beneficial toward saving the souls of oneself and others because of God's justice. God created us in this world with an exposure to suffering from many causes and in many ways. People suffer physically, mentally and/or spiritually and it's all used by God in some beneficial way.

But suffering is also eternal punishment for those who go to hell as the just consequence for their sins. It's interesting that suffering is a consequence of sin for both those who go to heaven and to hell.

## Heaven

The Catechism says that heaven is: *eternal life with God; communion of life and love with the Trinity and all the blessed. Heaven is the state of supreme and definitive happiness, the goal of the deepest longings of humanity*.

From the internet: *Heaven is where God lives. The Bible tells us that this is also where many of God's angels live as well as the* ***Christians*** *who have already died and now are with God. Heaven is very tangible… much like the earth we live in now, yet without its limitations. The scriptures tell us that there are mountains, rivers, trees, a beautiful city filled with unimaginable things, angels, people… even animals. It is actually more real than what we have ever known here. It is a place of rejoicing and dancing… a place of adventure and discovery… a place of unending joy and love and peace… a place, as a* ***Christian****, you will enjoy forever and ever.*

https://theheavenguy.org/ (my emphasis)

Note that this statement, like the Catholic teaching above, seems to say that heaven is only for Christians; an exclusive description rather than an inclusive one.

Similarly, *Jannah is the Muslim concept of heaven or paradise, where good and faithful Muslims go after Judgment Day. Jannah is a beautiful, peaceful garden where water flows and abundant food and drink are served to the dead and their families. Jannah has eight gates, the names of which are associated with righteous deeds.* (https://www.bing.com/search?q=In+Islam%2C+heaven+is+also+called+Jannah%2C+which+means+garden&qs=ds&form=QBRE) Note that this is also exclusive, except in this case for Muslims.

(Wikipedia) *Heaven, or the heavens, is a common religious* ***cosmological or transcendent supernatural place*** *where beings such as deities, angels, souls, saints, or venerated ancestors are said to originate, be enthroned, or reside. According to the beliefs of some religions, heavenly beings can descend to Earth or incarnate and earthly beings can ascend to Heaven in the afterlife or, in exceptional cases, enter Heaven alive.*

*Heaven is often described as a "highest place", the holiest place, a Paradise, in contrast to hell or the Underworld or the "low places" and universally or conditionally accessible by earthly beings according to various standards of divinity, goodness, piety, faith, or other virtues or right beliefs or simply divine will. Some believe in the possibility of a heaven on Earth in a world to come.*

That description is more generic and inclusive.

In *Falling into Heaven*, Mickey Robinson described his near-death experience of being in God's presence for a short time before returning to life with these statements which I've greatly edited in length and detail to stay within permission guidelines:

*I knew I was in the center and at the source of all life. What I was experiencing was more magnificent than the human language can describe.*

*I was more alive than any condition of being alive on earth. I was infused with perfect love and perfect peace.*

*The colors I saw are unlike earthly colors. Everything had the appearance of translucent jewels with flowing colors, but I could see right through them.*

He goes on in his description:

*There were no shadows in heaven. Light came into everything, as it also radiated out of everything.*

*Indescribable shapes and colors all vibrated like an orchestra of visual harmony. Everything was living, nothing was just material, and everything glorified God.*

*The one thing that caused the greatest awe in this experience, which affected me more than anything else, was feeling and hearing from God Himself the unrelenting, personal, everlasting love He has for me.*

I don't think that Mr. Robinson could have written those beautiful descriptions without having actually experienced them. I've not seen a better description of life in

heaven and yet this was not complete because he returned to life without experiencing what was next. That would be just the entry point into heaven. See *Falling Into Heaven*, chapter 13, for the complete description of Mr. Robinson's experience in God's presence.

Because heaven is entirely spiritual in nature, we can't see or touch or hear it objectively in this life. We have lots of evidence that heaven exists and some about what it's like but still lots of questions about what that life is really like. Because it's intersubjective, different religions and cultures and individuals have different views of what it's like, and they may all be true because heaven doesn't have to be the exact same for all of us. The conservative Catholic version may well be true for its followers but the Muslim or Buddhist or even non-religious believers' views may also be true for them.

In John 14:2, Jesus said, *"In my Father's house there are many dwelling places."* I take that to broadly mean that there's a place for everyone of differing religions, cultures and individuals. It means that there is a wide variety of 'dwelling places' so everyone will be at a home of their own choosing, not in someone else's idea of heaven. I believe that idea also applies to purgatory with a place for everyone, not just baptized Christians.

See ***What dreams may come*** above for that same idea – heaven is what you most want it to be, your own version of eternal happiness.

Because of the evidence of Jesus Christ, his Holy Mother Mary, angels and saints, actually having appeared to people living here on earth, it seems that heaven is actually right here around us, not somewhere in space or some other physical location. It's just in another invisible, undetectable dimension. When we die, we don't have to 'go' there; we're already there, just in a different state or dimension.

God created us, all humans, to ultimately live with him in heaven but gave us free will to choose it or otherwise. We will get there only through God's love and mercy – it's a gift, not something we earn or deserve, but we must accept it, and choose it. Perfect love and virtue are the coins of entrance to heaven, union with God's own love. Anything less would not be heaven.

**Hell**

The Catechism says that hell is: *the state of definitive* ***self-exclusion*** *from communion with God and the blessed,* ***reserved for those who refuse, by their own free choice, to believe and be converted from sin****, even to the end of their lives.*

CCC 1033: ***We cannot be united with God unless we freely choose to love him.*** *But we cannot love God if we sin gravely against him, against our neighbor or against ourselves.* (my emphasis)

(Wikipedia) *In religion and folklore, hell is a location or state in the afterlife in which evil souls are subjected to punitive suffering, most often through torture, as eternal punishment after death. Religions with a linear divine history often depict hells*

*as eternal destinations, the biggest examples of which are Christianity and Islam, whereas religions with reincarnation usually depict a hell as an intermediary period between incarnations, as is the case in the dharmic religions. Religions typically locate hell in another dimension or under Earth's surface.*

Hell is the extreme opposite of heaven and note that being there is a result of free will and sin. Like I've said above, I don't believe that anyone actually chooses to go to hell but that they do choose things that Satan has put before them that seem pleasing or otherwise good. Those can be seen in the Cardinal Sins shown above, as well as excessive greed, ego, selfishness, hate, anger, etc. For some reason, those choices seem justified to the sinner. Sin is the coin of entrance to hell and eternal banishment from God.

Further, some people freely choose to ignore or reject God, and anything related to the existence of such a being. That alone doesn't make them evil but still separates themselves from God and thence heaven. One reference said that those in hell don't lament that they are in hell; they choose to be there because they reject God.

Hell is commonly referred to as a fiery place with pain associated with being burned alive, one of the most painful experiences we have in this life. One reference I have says that the lower levels of purgatory near hell are also places of fiery pain and suffering. For believers, that alone should be warning enough to not want to go there. Non-believers probably just reject the whole idea.

*And **it is the free choice of all who end up there**. No one has gone to hell without choosing it. Now there are some who, because of their free will, choose not to be in the presence of God. They choose something else.* (*Purgatory: Cleansing Fire* by Good Catholic)

I don't agree with the way that comes across. These statements again imply that people intend to go to hell. As I've said above, I don't believe that anyone 'chooses' to go to hell; that's unreasonable. I understand that people make choices that may take them to hell, but they are choosing something for its perceived pleasure, good or benefit, not connecting that choice with going to hell. Satan works by convincing people that bad is good in some way or another and they choose that perceived good without intending the bad consequences.

And as I've written in other places, I don't believe that good people go to hell and do believe that purgatory is a lot more open to sinners of many different cultures than the Church seems open to. Good people don't *"choose not to be in the presence of God,"* but it's true that they may choose something else. I just don't believe that alone will determine their eternal condemnation.

But again, I could be wrong. If my liberal interpretation is incorrect and the traditional conservative interpretation is true, a lot of good people are in jeopardy of condemnation because they chose to not follow the narrow path. They may have made the wrong choice.

## Purgatory

The Bible doesn't talk about there being someplace between heaven and hell; it seems to be all in one or the other. And that the road to heaven is narrow and the highway to hell is wide.

But if you understand heaven as being a place of everlasting perfection and hell as being a place of eternal damnation, then there has to be a state in between for those who are not justly in heaven or hell, kind of like here on earth in this life – sometimes very good and sometimes very bad but mostly somewhere in between.

I've spent a lot of time and effort studying purgatory. I have a number of books and online resources to help me understand what it's like and how it works, to the extent that we can know. I recently completed an online course, *Purgatory – Cleansing Fire* provided by Good Catholic. (see Bibliography for link)

It's 27 lessons of text and video. It's strictly Catholic in context and quite thorough in scope. My 'review' is similar to this book, 24 pages in length. My review includes a lot of my own thinking in response to the statements in the course, as well as citing other resources as needed. Some of the following content is from that review rather than new thinking as I write this book.

Understanding purgatory is essential to the whole picture of life after death. And, from my point of view, it's where most of us are destined after death because we don't deserve eternal damnation but are not yet ready for heaven for any number of reasons. Purgatory is generally the pathway to heaven, but for some, it seems that it can be a state of being for a very long time.

I believe that, if you are a good person, you will most likely go to purgatory on your way to heaven. Then you will see what's needed to continue your journey on the stairway to heaven. I believe that two things are primary – reparation for your offenses against God and others, and growth in the knowledge and love of God.

Reparation will include suffering as a consequence of your offenses, but it can also be offset by loving and serving others, to the extent possible, at least by praying for them. That, in itself, will also increase your love which brings you closer to God. Both of those things – reparation and growth in love can be done here and now in this life, before your death which will place you higher on the stairway to heaven at your time of death.

The Church refers to the souls in purgatory as the 'poor souls' so you will see that in the following descriptions. The connotation refers to the Church's teaching that such souls cannot help themselves because they had that opportunity in this life and didn't take it. Therefore, they can only be helped by God, those in heaven, and those of us here in this life as we pray and make our offerings on their behalf. The Church dedicates many resources such as Mass and other liturgies, devotions and prayers for the sake of the 'poor souls in purgatory.'

**Catholic Church's teaching on purgatory**

CCC 1030: *All who die in God's grace and friendship but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation, but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven*.

CCC 1031: *The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of* ***the elect****, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned. The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence* (1431 – 1449) *and Trent* (below). *The tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire.*

The Council of Trent (1545 – 1563):

*Whereas the Catholic Church, instructed by the Holy Ghost, has, from the sacred writings and the ancient tradition of the Fathers, taught, in sacred councils, and very recently in this ecumenical Synod, that there is a Purgatory, and that the souls there detained are helped by the suffrages of the faithful, but principally by the acceptable sacrifice of the altar; the holy Synod enjoins on bishops that they diligently endeavour that the sound doctrine concerning Purgatory, transmitted by the holy Fathers and sacred councils, be believed, maintained, taught, and everywhere proclaimed by the faithful of Christ.* (Good Catholic – *Purgatory: Cleansing Fire*)

If it's true that everyone in purgatory is on the pathway to heaven, and only 'the elect' Christians can go to heaven, it again implies that no one else can go to purgatory either. It gives me the sense that the Church's version of purgatory is more like going to Mass where everyone is Catholic, rather than some other more open spiritual environment. And it's a very exclusive interpretation of God's plan for salvation rather than a more inclusive one.

Further, all human beings from the very first generation, hundreds of thousands of years ago, may have been 'good' people so, in my opinion, purgatory has to be open to them, even though the Church's conditions for salvation were only presented a few thousand years ago. And, even in these last few thousand years, many good people all around the world have not been baptized so purgatory must be open to them too. As well, many good people have chosen to believe other religions – Muslim, Hindu, Buddhism, Judaism, etc., so likewise, purgatory must be open to them, if they are 'good' people and not condemned because of their faith choices.

Another concern about the Church's strict teaching is that souls in purgatory are not able to derive merit for themselves. That would seem to warehouse them, put them in storage, and make them less than human. We have the fullness of humanity in this life and in heaven, so I don't see purgatory as being any less human. Purgatory is a progression from this life on earth to heaven, and the idea that we're anything less in purgatory doesn't make sense. If anything, I would think that our humanity is not only being cleansed in purgatory but that it's also being enhanced above our earthly nature, not diminished.

More affirmatively, I believe that purgatory is a time and place of great growth in grace and knowledge of God, something more fitting as the steps before heaven. Yes, it's a time of atonement and suffering for our sins but also preparation for the ultimate goal of human life, i.e., eternal life with God in heaven. That would require much more free will and responsiveness on our part than just passively waiting for others to move us forward. I don't think we can bridge that gap without a great deal of positive growth on our own part, not just something that others provide for us. I believe that we cannot only benefit our own cause in purgatory but that we have to. But again, we must choose to do so; God doesn't force us to.

### ***Purgatory: Cleansing Fire*** **by Good Catholic**

This is a subscription series of 27 sessions, text and video, about the Catholic teachings on purgatory. The following are my abbreviated highlights:

Session 1

*Purgatory is one of the Church's most misunderstood and maligned doctrines. Even among faithful Catholics, there's confusion about what we ought to believe about purgatory, how we ought to interact with the souls there, and even, whether or not it truly exists! That's why we made this series.*

Session 2

*The purifying force of God's love is the essence of Purgatory.*

Gerard van den Aardweg, Ph.D., *Hungry Souls*

*Only that which is perfectly holy can enter the presence of God. But this does not mean that every soul who is less-than-perfect will be utterly rejected and damned. Thus, there is a need for purification for those who have not completed their purification on earth.*

*When we sin, we get two unpleasant things in return: guilt, and the obligation to make satisfaction, that is, to make up for our sin.*

*We can make satisfaction on earth through prayer, penance, and bearing our crosses well. If, however, we die with some debt still to pay, we will have to make satisfaction in purgatory on our way to heaven. Purgatory cleanses us both from the guilt of unconfessed venial sins and all the satisfaction that we owe.*

*The end result is that we arrive in Heaven pure, free from sin and all its consequences, and fit for the celestial court.*

***The Fire of Purgatory***

*There are some important questions you probably want to know about purgatory, such as: what it will be like, and what sort of pain is experienced there?*

*Two related sorts of pain are experienced in purgatory:* ***the pain of loss*** *and* ***the pain of sense****.*

*The pain of loss pertains to the longing that the poor souls feel for God, of Whom they have a much clearer image than they did on earth. Having seen God upon their*

*death, they now desire Him with their whole being, but do not yet possess Him.* ***This is the chief pain of Purgatory: the absence of God, temporary though it is.***

*The other type of pain,* ***the pain of sense****, is much more like a physical pain felt through "the senses."* ***It remains mysterious because it is experienced by the soul rather than the body****. Nonetheless, it is comparable to that which we feel in our bodies on earth.*

***The two types of pain have a common source****: what we might deem* ***the fire of purgatory****. Many saints, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, have designated the principal purgatorial agent as "flame," and further, they identify these flames as the same ones that afflict the damned, but with different intentions and effects.*

*The fire of Purgatory, which comprises the sufferings of the "pain of loss" and the "pain of sense," is* ***the fire of the love of God*** *enkindled in the soul right after death.*
Gerard van den Aardweg, Ph.D., *Hungry Souls*

*A soul in purgatory is so inflamed with the love of God—whom she sees far more clearly than she did on earth—that she desires Him with unspeakable longing. As she is held back by the remnants of her sins, these flames of love will torture her until she is finally united to her God.*

*The soul also sees her own imperfections distinctly and abhors them, and feels more keenly than ever the horror of sin and how it displeases God.*

***The Consolation of Purgatory***

*The saints remind us, however, that the pains of purgatory are infused with great joy and consolation.*

*The holy souls are assured of their salvation and know that they will at length possess the full vision of God. This is qualitatively different from the suffering of hell, where souls are tormented by the fact that they will never see God.*

*The poor souls are also perfectly resigned to God's will, which makes them more than willing to endure His just punishments.*

Session 5 **How Does Time Work in Purgatory?**

*Whatever is said about subjective impressions as to the duration of time, it is certain that the measure is, more or less that of earth—the measure these souls know well.*

***Get Us Out Of Here!!****,* by Nicky Eltz, documents souls in purgatory visiting Maria Simma and also being present at Mass hoping to gain assistance in their journey to heaven. If souls are actually able to visit our real, current life, at least at those 'times', they also would have some measure of time that we experience. My own thinking is that souls in purgatory are really quite close to us here in our life, even though we are not directly aware of them. We can think of them as being close and I suspect that they can also be close to us because that's where they may be most comfortable, if they are able to. Just thinking about it, I suspect that their association with those of us in this life keeps them relatively in the same time frame.

As I've written in other essays, life after death is really a state of mind; our soul exists in a spiritual world that is experienced through our mind and somehow the senses of our mind – sight, sound, some sense of feeling. We will know what is happening around us. We will somehow communicate with others as if we were talking to them. We will feel the heat and pain associated with the 'fire' of purgatory. Most of the near-death-experiences describe at least the sense of sight as they at first are out-of-body and can see their death scenes. Some describe hearing the conversations going on around them. Some see familiar figures, etc. So, if they can and do sense and experience both physical and spiritual worlds, they may very well have an association with the passage of time here on earth.

It's perhaps hard to understand the spiritual world and how it works because we can't sense it in physical terms. The spiritual world co-exists with the natural world but doesn't work under the natural laws which govern the material world, including time. Like I said above, it's a state of mind. So, when we think of time in our natural world, we measure it with physical reality. In the spiritual world, time is measured in our state of mind, how it's perceived relative to our own state of being.

A related issue is, how long one must remain in purgatory and if some may literally be in that state until the 'end of time.'

I can understand that some poor souls may not have anyone in this life to pray for them and could just fall through the cracks, be overlooked, or just not be loved by anyone. But my thinking is that God's love, mercy and justice wouldn't allow anyone to suffer 'until the end of the world' if they were in purgatory, i.e., not condemned to hell. Purgatory is understood to be the pathway to heaven, not an end in itself.

Another thought is that, in order for a soul to be fully prepared for heaven, it must transform from being 'just good enough' to 'holy' and that occurs through purgatory, but each one has to agree to that transformation. God certainly blesses all those in purgatory but still doesn't force them into that transformation against their will. They still have to choose it.

I don't understand why they would not, but I see that resistance every day in my own experience. Many people resist that transformation here and now and never make that choice even though they've had many opportunities. Maybe that resistance carries forward through purgatory because that's the choice they made in this life all the way through their death. Maybe that choice to resist transformation is literally their eternal decision that purgatory doesn't change. And maybe they will not have the opportunity after death to change their decision, hence being 'just good enough' but not 'holy,' and that could keep them in purgatory 'until the end of time.'

I also tie that choice to the love that such souls have in their hearts at the time of death, i.e., love of God and love for others. As I've said in many other places, that love is literally the distance we are from God – higher love brings us closer to God, less love keeps us further from God. If people don't love God enough, it may be their choice to

be ‘just good enough’ but not ‘holy.’ And it is a choice, whether conscious or subconscious.

If that is true, the reality of purgatory, then I could understand how/why many people may be in purgatory literally forever (or at least until ‘the end of the world,’ Christ’s second coming and our final judgment). That could be the case for those who’ve chosen to be ‘just good enough’ but not ‘holy.’

Session 7 **How Can We Avoid Purgatory?**

As I’ve written in other places, the Church’s teaching on purgatory is very ‘Catholic’, written by Catholics for Catholics, and is largely unavailable and not understandable by the general population. Accept your cross, do penance, receive the sacraments, prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Are those really the only way to please God enough to go to heaven directly and avoid purgatory?

I frequently see ‘good news’ in the daily media about people that are doing very good works and charity which are clearly acts of love for others. Especially moving are when those acts are done by children who just don’t want people to suffer. All kinds of acts of love, I believe are very strongly associated with God’s own love. God uses people as his love-givers. God’s love flows through people. We receive much of God’s love through the acts of people who love us as well as strangers who just do acts of love for us. That’s reflected in the reply from Maria Simma (see below).

You can also see more about Maria and her descriptions of purgatory on the internet, for example: http://www.jesusmariasite.org/maria-simma-the-amazing-secret-of-the-souls-in-purgatory/. A quote from that website:

Maria, please tell us*: who are those who have the greatest chance of going straight to Heaven?*

Maria Simma: *Those who have a good heart towards everyone. Love covers a multitude of sins.*

And also from that website:

*Therefore, we really can say that* ***love, humility and abandonment to God*** *are the three golden keys to going directly to Heaven.*

Suffering is another significant factor in avoiding purgatory or mitigating its consequences. Christ suffered for our sins. We suffer in this life for our sins. We are encouraged to ‘take up our cross’ of suffering. We may suffer in purgatory some more after death for our sins. Suffering is clearly at least part of every pathway to heaven to offset our shortcomings and faults.

Some people suffer greatly more than justice for their sins would inflict and that extra suffering is known by God. If they suffer more than their due, it would seem that they could avoid purgatory altogether due to God’s mercy and justice.

All suffering is beneficial toward saving souls of oneself and others because of God’s justice. God created us in this world with an exposure to suffering from many

causes and in many ways. People suffer physically, mentally and/or spiritually and it's all used by God in some beneficial way. (see **Suffering** above)

But suffering is also eternal punishment for those who go to hell as the just consequence for their sins. It's interesting that suffering is a consequence of sin for both those who go to heaven and to hell.

Session 10 **What the Poor Souls Can and Can't Do**

One of the problems with this whole issue of life after death is that we just don't know whether our departed loved ones are safe from hell, enjoying the fullness of heaven or are, in fact, still in need of our prayers and other offerings for their journey in purgatory. So, we have to pray as if they are all in purgatory and in need of our prayers.

Another is the understanding that the souls in purgatory can no longer act on their own behalf; that they are dependent on the love and mercy of God and on our prayers and offerings on their behalf. They are passive in that they don't have the ability or power to act for their own benefit, a consequence of their death in that state.

I struggle with that one but all the resources that I've studied agree with that conclusion. But I do believe that everyone in purgatory is there because of the choices they have made in their physical life before death, even though most of them didn't understand the ultimate consequences of those choices, i.e., purgatory or worse.

Session 19 **Have the Right Mindset Towards Purgatory**

*To aim for purgatory, rather than heaven, is to risk an eternity in hell. When Jesus said to strive for the narrow door, not the wide path, He did not suggest seeking an alternate "middle" way.*

I completely agree with the premise but it's a more realistic attitude for those who even believe in purgatory, let alone understand it very well. Most of us don't consider ourselves to be 'saints' and realistically don't want to be in a strict sense. I've known many people that I would consider to be saintly – deep faith in God, frequent daily Masses, very prayerful, loving, generous etc. but they are a very few examples from hundreds of people I've known, let alone the general public at large. And in this context, only very serious Catholics would fall into that category and all the others don't choose to be.

Secondly, most of us have a lot of baggage that we just can't or even want to let go of during our earthly life right up to our death that will have to be cleansed in purgatory. Only a few can effectively let go of our earthly desires and devote ourselves to a saintly lifestyle. And most people are not even aware of or understand what we're talking about here.

Thirdly, I think that suffering is necessary and is truly a path to heaven, but our nature is to avoid suffering, to treat and minimize it when we get it, and aren't even thinking about the potential positive effect of offsetting time and pain in purgatory, let alone avoiding purgatory altogether. Trying to preclude time in purgatory probably requires acceptance of and offering our suffering in reparation for our sins and

negligences. Again, I think very few people have that attitude. For example, I have a 50+ year history of headaches, and I take a lot of Tylenol instead of taking no pills and offering up the pain. I'd have a miserable life otherwise.

Finally, I think of purgatory as the great equalizer. Everyone at this stage will be treated equally regardless of their status in this life on earth. The poor will be treated the same as the rich, the weak the same as the strong and powerful, the sick and handicapped the same as the healthy, etc., because the measure of their outcome will be the quality of their soul, not their fame or fortune. Yes, there will be great diversity, but all will be treated with the same love and justice. Generally, that means those who have benefited greatly in this life will be humbled and those who've had little in this life will be elevated. Jesus spoke frequently that humility will be rewarded while pride will be brought down. (end of ***Purgatory: Cleansing Fire***)

### ***Get Us Out Of Here!!,*** **Maria Simma speaks with Nicky Eltz**

Maria Simma (1915-2004) was born in Sonntag, Austria. She endeavored to enter the convent as a child but was always found too sickly to attend. She returned to her hometown for the rest of her life. At age 25, she was visited by a soul from purgatory, and she dispelled him. The next day she discussed this visit with her priest who told her, if he visits again, ask him, *"what is it you need from me?"* The next time he visited her, she asked him that question. *The man suddenly stopped, turned towards her and replied, "Please have three holy Masses said for my intentions and then I will be delivered." And then he immediately disappeared, and Maria said, "It was then that I knew that he was a poor soul."*

(https://www.mysticsofthechurch.com/2013/10/maria-simma-visits-from-souls-in.html)

Maria was visited by souls from purgatory for the rest of her life and developed a very realistic understanding of how purgatory works. To me, this is one of the best resources to help understand life after death.

This book was written by Nicky Eltz following a series of more than thirty interviews with Maria Simma in her home from 1991 to 1996. The book was first published in 2002. Maria passed away in 2004 after she had approved the text. Here are some excerpts:

**Now please, what exactly is Purgatory?** (Author)

(Maria) *Purgatory is a place and a condition that every soul experiences when it still needs to do atonement and reparation for sins that it committed during its life before it too can join Jesus in Heaven. Very little is taught about it today, and when little is taught about Purgatory, it leads far more people becoming curious on their own and, without any spiritual guidance, they then stumble so easily into occult practices. Usually, it's said that Purgatory is only a condition. This is only partially true, for it is most definitely also a place. It is also a time for waiting where the souls yearn for God. This*

*yearning for Him is their greatest suffering. All Poor Souls experience this no matter at what level they find themselves.*

*There are three main levels in Purgatory, and I experience the souls that need relatively little* (the highest level) *for their deliverance into Heaven.*

**What might some other differences be between the higher and the lower levels of Purgatory?**

*In the lowest level, Satan can still attack the souls whereas he can no longer do that in the higher levels. It is true that we are tested while here on earth and that testing stops with our death. However, the souls in the deepest third of Purgatory must suffer away the sins that they committed before our prayers, Masses and good deeds can be beneficial to them. And a part of that suffering in the deeper levels is that they continue being attacked by Satan.*

*The many levels of Purgatory are different in the same ways that all our earthly illnesses are different. One can be a mere irritation or a fingernail, while another can consume the entire body like a fire. This fire exists only in the lower levels of Purgatory but not in the highest.*

My comment on this: remember that you will still have free will after death which allows for the openness to Satan's temptations in the lowest level of purgatory. What's the temptation? To still not choose to be with God, to still resist God's gifts, to choose self over others, etc., anything to keep you from choosing and being with God. God allows that temptation because of his gift of free will. Fortunately, the higher levels of purgatory preclude Satan's interference because you will have chosen to be with God. Failure to choose God in this life may be the reason some are in the lower levels of purgatory after death.

**And within these three main levels there are more levels?**

*Yes, a very large number, because every soul is so very different when it arrives there. There are great sufferings and there are lesser sufferings and everything in between. There are probably as many levels as there are souls because no two people or two souls, of course, are ever identical.*

**So, God puts the souls there to cleanse them of their sins not yet atoned for and repaired?**

*No, this is usually taught incorrectly, and false teaching such as this can so easily turn people away.* ***God does NOT put them there! The souls judge and then assign themselves to the appropriate level****.* (my emphasis) *It is THEY who wish to cleanse themselves before they join God. And realizing this specific truth about God's love for us is very important.*

**Are the sufferings of Purgatory greater than those that we suffer here on earth?**

*All in all, they're greater, and sometimes very much greater, especially in the bottom third. They suffer more spiritually than we do.*

**How broad is the span of time that souls must be there before they can enter Heaven?**

*Oh, that's very broad. Some for a mere half-hour and others for the rest of time, to the very last day. The average, the souls say, is forty years.*

**It is said that time no longer exists after this life, but then you say that Purgatory is a time for yearning for God. Please explain.**

*It's correct that, after this life, time no longer exists; but when we are told that a soul must suffer so much time there, it is being translated into time for us.*

**Do the Poor Souls have bodies as we do here or do they have another, say spiritual body?**

*They say they do not notice that they do not have a body with them. They have a transfigured body, and it can take the form of a healed and dressed human body.*

**The souls regret things that they did badly while here. Do they also regret things that they did not do at all while they were here on earth?**

*Yes, very much so. They regret chances that they missed to do good for God and for their fellow men and they get to see what good fruits would have come from them. When we die, we lose the chance to do good deeds. The Souls in Purgatory can no longer earn merits as we can here.*

**Do people who have never set foot inside a church go to Heaven?**

*Oh, certainly they do, and I'm sure many more than we think, because all of us have some pride in us. But because they have never had access to the truth, their Purgatory is much lighter than that of the faithful churchgoers. But their level of Holiness will not be the same either because they did not receive or accept the graces.*

IMPORTANT POINTS: First, to me, it says that purgatory is more inclusive than the Church's teaching. It doesn't say anything about the requirement for Baptism, although Maria was a devout Catholic and may have presumed that basis without mentioning it. But I don't recall any place in the book that Maria limits purgatory to Christians only.

Second, she talks about purgatory for people who didn't have *'access to the truth'* which seems to be open to all kinds of people without limit based on their practice of religion or none at all. And then it goes on to say that people who do practice their faith have a harder journey because they do have access to the truth with a higher responsibility of behavior but also more grace to deal with it.

**Maria, why does Satan exist? Does hell really exist?**

*God wanted to test His angels and when He did, some of them led by Lucifer, another of his names, said 'no' to Him with pride. He was the most beautiful and most intelligent of all the angels and wanted to have things his way and not God's way. Yes, hell really does exist.*

**When we pray that someone experiences a peaceful death, does this really help achieve this?**

*Is God deaf? It even helps if the person we have in our heart died a long time ago. God and prayer are not limited or in any way affected by time. God is still there fifty years ago as He is also already there fifty years from now. He will do for us exactly as much as we trust Him to help us.*
(end of ***Get Us Out Of Here!!***)

### *Purgatory: The Forgotten Church*

This is a documentary video (DVD) in my library about purgatory that is another resource to better understand the whole concept and Church teaching, somewhat like the above-described *Purgatory: Cleansing Fire* series of lessons on purgatory. I haven't yet written a review but it's worth watching. (about 1.5 hours)

### *A Window Into My Soul*

The following are a few relevant essays that I wrote in 2016 in my book, *A Window Into My Soul*:

**The good news and the bad news**

*The good news is that God wants you to pass safely through this life and to live happily ever after in heaven with him. Jesus explained it best in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). The son chose to take his inheritance, leave the family home, and spend his fortune in a distant place. He fell into poverty as the country collapsed and he became a slave tending the animals. He came to his senses and decided to return to his father in sorrow for his failure, accept his punishment, and seek a place as a hired hand, not as a son. His father, seeing the son coming in the distance, ran out to greet him, welcomed him with open arms, forgave him, put a ring on his finger, and called for a celebration for his return. God will similarly treat anyone who returns to him in faith and repentance; it's that easy.*

*The bad news is that it may be difficult or unlikely for a person with a strongly established behavior that excludes or minimizes a relationship with God to even know what to do or say to be able to turn to God in any significant way. They may not be able to help themselves and may not be able or willing to accept help from anyone else. If you are somewhere in this general group of people and are concerned about your own life after death, what are some of the things you could think about?*

*If the strict interpretation of the principle applies such that eternal judgment will be based on the condition of one's soul at the time of death with no allowance for anything that may happen afterward – it would appear that many souls will be lost. Christians are taught that principle through the Bible and through fundamental religious education, and I have taken it as a matter of faith. My problem with it, on face value, is that it leaves too little hope for so many people, so I've tried to find a more hopeful interpretation.*

*First, we must rely more on God's love and mercy for those souls based on their sincerity and perhaps lack of guilt for their own lack of faith or understanding. My fundamental background makes me hesitant to go into relativity as being an excuse because I'm a firm believer in moral certitude – black and white – but I realize that it's gray for many people. What's clearly wrong for me is completely acceptable to many others. For example, I'm a firm believer that the Sixth Commandment – You shall not commit adultery – prohibits all sexual activity outside of marriage between a man and woman, but clearly many people don't believe that it's wrong at all. If everyone who broke the Sixth Commandment went to hell, there would be very few people in heaven.*

(After several more years of study and consideration since I wrote that, I'm less black and white, more gray, and see it as more relative to one's own situation)

*So, it's not sin alone that is the determining factor in one's judgment, but the interior condition of one's soul and only God can see and judge that. Secondly then, we must presume that God weighs other factors in the judgment, such as the environment of one's life, decisions made, good things done versus bad, pain and suffering already endured, etc. What's the overall balance? How bad is bad? How much of the just price have they already paid?*

*My third thought is that perhaps we may still have an opportunity after death to make choices that will affect the outcome. Is it going to be a one-way path with no personal control or a pathway that allows us to learn as we travel along and make some choices as we go?*

*Let's say I'm a nonbeliever who gets through death to find myself "alive" on the other side with some control over my direction. My first reaction might be a sharp turn toward God and immediate sorrow for my wrongdoing out of fear of an upcoming judgment. Would that be enough to make the difference? Might be, but it might also be too late because that's basically what the Bible says. We simply don't know how God is going to make that judgment.*

*One common theory is that judgment will be essentially self-inflicted so that at some point after death we'll see our entire lives before us, the good and the bad, and it will be self-evident what we face as a consequence. At that singular point, we may have the last opportunity to change our direction, choosing God over Satan. I suspect that few will see a good enough picture of their lives to determine that they are ready for heaven. In the book,* ***Get Us Out Of Here!!****, Maria Simma states that souls go to purgatory on their own initiation to prepare themselves for heaven. Hence, those in a close relationship with Satan could actually see, upon reviewing their lives, that they really have no choice but to go to hell or maybe at the very bottom of purgatory.*

*My biggest concern is for any person who has a long-standing personal commitment against any relationship to God. They would likely maintain that attitude*

*all the way to judgment. What's in their souls right now would likely be the same condition that would determine their salvation or damnation.*

**Is there life after death?**

*Most mainstream religions are based on the fundamental principle that God exists and that man's ultimate goal in life is to be with God in heaven after death.*

*A similar principle demands that there is also an opposite reality, that is, the existence of Satan and hell. It's unreasonable to believe in one without the other. Unfortunately, that also means that not everyone is necessarily going to achieve a destiny of eternal life in heaven. So, let's explore what that means.*

*Christians' faith in God and heaven, Satan and hell is largely based on the New Testament of the Bible. The initial thrust of the four Gospels is on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, who was subsequently executed by the religious and governmental powers as an insurrectionist. That could have been the end of the story about a charismatic man who said and did wonderful things, but for his resurrection from death. The rest of the New Testament focuses on Christ's works and instructions to his disciples after he arose from the dead and their spreading of that new faith in life after death, heaven and hell.*

*Jesus taught extensively about heaven and especially about the Father, largely in parables. He also taught about Satan and hell, such as the temptation of Jesus by "the tempter" to whom he responded, "Get away, Satan! It is written: The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve." Then the devil left him and, behold, angels came and ministered to him. (Matthew 4:10-11)*

*Christians' faith is that the nature of our lives includes a spiritual element we know as our soul and that our soul will live on forever after death. The questions are: Where and how? What will that be like? How can we affect it, if at all?*

*We turn to the New Testament and the Church's teaching for over 2,000 years to find those answers, and also to the teachings of saints and scholars who have studied, collaborated, and written volumes about these questions from numerous points of view. We don't have to recreate their work; we just have to study it for ourselves.*

*The where and how is just a step away through the doorway of death because we will actually live through it. Our soul will awake in the spiritual world beyond our physical nature. Heaven, hell, and purgatory are real places; it's just unclear exactly where they are in physical terms. Because God is universal, these places are also universal.*

*What will the afterlife be like? It will offer the entire range from the deepest depths of hell with its related pain and suffering to the highest levels of heaven next to God with unbounded love and joy. Purgatory will be in between with some of both, depending on the level of salvation we have attained in this life.*

*A fundamental principle of many religions is that our final destiny – heaven or hell – is determined by the nature of our soul at the time of our death. We will be*

*judged once and for all eternity based on the condition of our soul at that singular point in time in our life. Under that premise, we could change our destiny up to the last second of the life of our body, but not after death.*

*If that were strictly the case, there would be relatively few souls going directly to heaven as compared to the many that aren't perfect at the time of death. To explain what happens after death in a more hopeful outcome, religions have proposed the state of life known as purgatory for those who don't deserve an eternity in hell, but are not yet ready for life with God in heaven. That would be a period of time (whatever time is in a spiritual world) for reparation or expiation for our shortcomings (sins, failure to do what we're supposed to do, etc.) and preparation for life in heaven.*

*I argue for an expanded understanding of what happens in that unknown gray area of life after death. I believe firmly in the existence of God and heaven, Satan and hell, and purgatory. I also believe in the permanent spiritual nature of the human soul. But to postulate that the human soul is incapable of further learning or choosing after death limits the nature of our intellect, will, and conscience. I propose that there may still be an opportunity after death for subsequent learning and the ability to make choices that would affect the outcome of our eventual destiny after sufficient conversion and reparation in purgatory for our shortcomings.*

*We will determine our own level in purgatory based on our own lives, what we have chosen and done, what's really in our hearts. So, we can affect the outcome and choose a place closer to heaven and further from hell through our own free will. We attain that through the love and support of God, who is just waiting for our next move. It's a gift and we just need to accept it.*

**What are the standards for entry into heaven?**

*What it all comes down to is this: What are the entry standards for getting into heaven? No standards because everyone is going to heaven, anyway? Very strict standards that few are going to meet? Somewhere in between?*

*For many, it's a question they ignore because they don't believe in God or heaven or life after death. But for many others who do believe, it's the big unknown and the reason for all their efforts to make the cut.*

*Think of the efforts professional athletes make to have a chance at making the team. They know the standards are very high and that there are only a limited number of spaces on the team. They begin their training at a young age and continue to develop their skills as they grow. Many go to college because that's the place where they can get the best coaching and experience. They practice and work out daily.*

*Well, it's the same with getting into heaven. The standards are the highest and require a continual, strong effort. We need to get the best coaching and training every day. We have to win the battles within our lives that could keep us from reaching that goal.*

*There are many references in the Bible that indicate the strict standards for entry into heaven. Here are a few:*

- *I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:20)*
- *Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction and those who enter through it are many. How narrow the gate and constricted the road that leads to life. And those who find it are few. (Matthew 7:13, 14)*
- *Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Amen, I say to you, it will be hard for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I say to you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (Matthew 19:23, 24)*

*It's not clear whether the standards are for getting into heaven immediately upon death or by way of purgatory. Presumably, most of us will enter heaven through purgatory. The standards for entry into purgatory are somewhere between not good enough for heaven and high enough to keep us from hell. But we don't know where the cutoff line is. Aim too low and we may miss the cut. We need to be assured that there are standards and need to do our best to meet them. Failure is literally hell.*

*The standards for passing from purgatory into heaven are perfection in every sense. We must complete atonement for our shortcomings to become eligible for passage. We enter purgatory with the results of our life choices, thoughts, words, and deeds and leave with all of them completely resolved. The length and difficulty of purgatory is strictly based on the condition of our souls at the time of our death. The better the condition, the shorter and easier the pathway. It's said elsewhere that some will be in purgatory until the end of time. That may not be hell, but a long and difficult time in purgatory is not the goal. We can do better, but will we?*

**Pathways through purgatory**

*I think of purgatory as a maze of pathways leading to heaven. Those with relatively minor obligations will take a shorter, easier pathway while others with more serious obligations will take a longer, more difficult pathway. We have no measure for how long or difficult that will be. It's relative to the weight of our judgment but might also be affected by how we respond to it.*

*My thinking is that all pathways have three elements – conversion, reparation, and growth. Conversion is changing one's perspective to know and love God. I believe most people have good enough hearts to avoid hell, but many have either denied God or have no significant relationship with him. They will need to be converted to know and love God for without that no one can go to heaven. That has to be reflected in our intellect and free will to make it happen. It might be that those who deny God in this life continue to deny God in purgatory and will have a very*

*long pathway until they make the decision to know and love God. Those who already know and love God will be on a shorter, easier pathway.*

*The element of reparation or expiation is "paying the price" for our shortcomings. That may take any number of forms but won't be easy or light. It might be as painful as hell, but without the permanence. Tradition and some testimony describe it as being the same as the fires of hell. Because we won't have a physical body, the pain will be spiritual, so my sense is that it will be akin to depression, worry, anxiety, grief, or deep sadness. At any rate, we won't be happy about it, but that's the price we'll have to pay before we can fully experience conversion and growth.*

*The element of growth is both intellectual and spiritual. We'll start our pathway right where our life was at the time of our death. We'll still have our intellect to experience what's happening, see the effects of the pathways and make choices to follow a particular pathway. The spiritual aspect is all about love of God and neighbor. Those who have been selfish may still carry that into purgatory and will not be free to move toward God until they turn to love. We've got to grow in knowledge and love of God until we reach the level needed for passage into heaven. In other words, we'll need to become a saint. That's the goal of our pathway.*

*My point in describing all of this is to urge you to take every step possible in this life to conversion, reparation, and spiritual growth. Prepare yourself for an easier judgment and a shorter pathway to heaven. What you accomplish now, here on earth in this life, has a direct effect on your outcome.*

**Stuck in purgatory**

*One of my biggest concerns is that many people could become stuck in purgatory. Various things I've read about purgatory and the stories told by souls that have actually visited people say that individuals can get stuck in purgatory and be unable to move into heaven. Why can't these poor souls move upward?*

*My first reaction is that they can't self-determine the right direction. They must accept God's gifts of love and grace to move forward on that pathway. So that's the first clue, it's because they still haven't accepted God's grace for some reason. And why not? Because they never accepted it during their temporal lives. They persisted in disbelief and denied the very gift that would lead them to heaven.*

*Secondly, purgatory isn't God's punishment for our failings and misdeeds. I don't believe that God punishes anyone because of his overwhelming love and mercy. Purgatory is a direct result of our own choosing, even though we don't recognize the choice at the time. When we make the choice to deny God's grace, we point our lives toward the lower levels of purgatory. We may still have a good heart and not merit condemnation in hell, but we won't have the levels of God's grace to move upward toward heaven. God does not condemn anyone to hell or the lower levels of purgatory; people take that pathway of their own free will.*

*I believe purgatory is very much like our current life on earth, to some extent a continuation of the current state of our souls. I look around and see many people who choose to remain steadfast in their opposition to any form of belief in or relationship with God. So, they will likely maintain that firm opposition through death and into purgatory, if not hell itself. If they can't or won't recognize God in their lives now, it could be that they won't be able to do so after death and are destined to become stuck in purgatory.*

*Why would they not go to hell? Maybe they will, but I believe that God judges the soul and that good people, though not in a positive relationship with God, will somehow be saved from hell. That could only mean life in purgatory until they have completed their preparation for heaven. And without any basis for understanding how to get there, they could remain stuck in purgatory. Compared to hell, that's not bad, but compared to heaven, it's a very disheartening position, especially if it's for eternity.*

*On the positive side, the upper levels of purgatory are approaching heaven so they will be free from the pain and anguish of the lower levels. That could be the entry level of many people of faith and good lives who are just not yet fully ready for heaven. Not many of us are saints so we won't be fully ready for heaven when we die. We will need some time to polish up our souls, either in reparation for our failings or preparation for our entry into heaven.*

*Also, relative to our pathway through purgatory is the presence or absence of good works and prayer, pain and suffering in our temporal lives. Purgatory is a place for expiation for our failings and misdeeds. Some of that expiation is borne in our temporal lives, both when we do good things and when we suffer. Some may have a very short pathway through purgatory because they have already completed a significant amount of their expiation.*

*Finally, the lower levels of purgatory are very much like hell, but still with the ultimate promise of heaven at the end. That thought gives me hope for all those who otherwise seem to have lived a good life, but still rejected God's grace when they had opportunities to accept it.*

(end of ***A Window Into My Soul*** essays)

**So, what's it like to 'live' after death?**

To understand what it's like in purgatory, put it in context between heaven and hell. The higher up the stairway to heaven, the more your life will be like heaven and vice versa, the lower on the stairway will be more like hell.

So, what's it like to live in heaven? First, you are constantly in the presence of God, all loving and supreme in every sense – power, beauty, intelligence, etc. God is not a single body like ours so it's like you are literally in God's own nature, his being.

Second, the predominant characteristic is love – love of God and love of everyone else. That means no selfishness even though being in heaven is completely satisfying of all our desires.

Third, everyone else in heaven is holy and also in God's nature. The angels will have their own individual God-given nature and everyone else from this life on earth will be the very best version of themselves. All the greatest minds that ever lived, all the greatest composers, musicians, singers, artists, scientists, writers, etc., will be there in the prime of their talent. You will be able to enjoy their gifts to your heart's content. And for them to be in heaven will be to express their talents for us. Whatever your greatest desire for knowledge or entertainment is, the ones who can fulfill those desires are there too.

Purgatory will be less of all those pleasures but you will understand that they are waiting for you in heaven so your desires will be unfulfilled, causing you to suffer from its absence. Hell will be completely void of those pleasures and that will be your eternal punishment.

So, what's the purpose of life after death? For humans to spend the rest of eternity in God's kingdom in love, peace and satisfaction? Yes, of course, but it could be a lot more than that. The purpose, I believe, is that, upon completion of our preparation in purgatory, we become a part of God's plan, perhaps somewhat like the purpose of angels, all working in some manner for God. We are like them in spirit, so why not in function?

We tend to believe that heaven will be like the things we know and enjoy in this life on earth, and we think of it all in human terms – family, friends, lifestyle, enjoyable places and activities, etc. Just more of the things we enjoy without the things we don't – physical limitations, pain, suffering, anxiety, frustration, etc. We each have our own idea or version of what that kind of heaven will be like. But, again, it will be different for each person, customized to their own needs and desires.

We may have a purpose, unknown to us in this life, to be revealed when we are ready for it in purgatory and/or heaven (obviously not in hell). Our greatest desires will be satisfied but those desires may be different after death because we will have become fully aware of our purpose and relationship with God, as do the angels. It will be more than we can understand in this life with our limitations.

Our purpose may be related to our knowledge and experience in this life, our God-given talents. It may be a way for us to increase our expertise for the benefit of God's plan for us. After all, we will be in the company of all the experts that have preceded us who paved the way for our own skills and knowledge. Or it may be for something entirely different, but I think it will be something that's already inside us, our desires or our undeveloped talents.

I don't believe that our purpose will be for selfish reasons, our own pleasure or satisfaction, but something for the good of others. I think selfishness will be overcome in purgatory as we grow in the love needed for heaven.

Purgatory may be the time and place for us to prepare for our ultimate purpose by clearing out our shortcomings and opening up our opportunities to grow in knowledge and love.

Life after death is a real life, not mythical or simply 'spiritual' like a thought or memory or dream. Maria Simma (above) says that we'll appear to have a clothed body that looks like ourselves at a mature age, normal to our previous existence. That is what gives us a unique identity; without it we would all 'look' alike. When we no longer have the effects of bodily limitations, we won't look weak or diminished as we do when we're old or lacking our mental capacity. And we won't need the frivolous things we use in this life to make ourselves look better – we'll look like who we really are.

Another way to think of our bodies after death is to read about Christ's appearances to the apostles after his resurrection. He had a fully human body so it could be seen and touched but he still could come and go in an instant, not limited by doors or walls or location. Our 'body' after death will have some of those 'supernatural' characteristics.

Other examples of our body after death are the apparitions of our Holy Mother Mary. She appeared only to select individuals, even when many people were present; only the selected could see or hear her. We have statues and pictures of Mary everywhere in the Church based on the images of those apparitions.

Maria Simma described her first visitor from purgatory as a visible man that could instantly appear and disappear, could talk so she could communicate with him, but she couldn't expel his body. It was a spiritual body with some physical characteristics that she could experience.

In my previous book, I thought of seeing that reality in our 'mind's eye' and equating that to our soul. Our very existence in spiritual life allows us to 'see' and 'hear' others including God. To a large extent, we'll only see what we want to see, controlled by our mind's eye. We can do that now in some sense but then it will be our means of communication and encounter with God and other souls.

Because there are millions of souls in purgatory, if we could see all of those 'bodies,' at once, it would be more crowded than the evening commute – no free space. Because they are spiritual, not physical, they won't actually occupy 'space' but because we can see them individually, they have to appear separate as if they did take up space. So, I believe that we won't see the crowds; we'll only see those who are relevant to our own position, and likewise, we'll be seen by those to whom we are relevant. So, yes, we may well be with our loved ones in a very pleasing environment rather than in a crowd of strangers.

Some descriptions of purgatory are pretty bad, including hell-like conditions of fire, pain and suffering but I believe that could only be at the lower levels on the stairway, closest to hell. But there is physical evidence that shows the reality of that level of

suffering in purgatory. All the more reason to not be that far down the stairway at the time of death.

For most of us, I think life in purgatory will be better than life here on earth. All our bodily pains and limitations will be gone. We'll be satisfied with our position because we will fully understand that we are right where we deserve to be. For some, that may be enough – lack of pain and other negatives, satisfaction and peace within ourselves, etc. Why isn't that good enough?

Two negatives – we'll be further down the stairway because complacency with 'just good enough to get by' is Satan's tool to keep us from loving God more fully; and we'll fully understand the joys of heaven without being able to enjoy them. Like being in a candy store and not being able to have any. Heaven is so much more than purgatory which can't fully satisfy our desires or needs.

I think a lot of the people in purgatory will be there because they've had no significant relationship with God at the time of death. They may be good people but aren't ready for unity with God. I think, after death, they'll be fully aware of the reality of heaven and the strong desire to complete the journey up the stairway.

What really strikes me about that is making the choice to not accept God's gifts when they are so readily available to us here and now but may not be after death. We'll go to purgatory because that's what we chose, not because of God's judgment for our failings. Our position on the stairway to heaven is completely determined by our own choices in this lifetime.

One of the most enjoyable and satisfying attributes of heaven is nearly unlimited freedom – freedom to see and hear, go and do, learn and experience. It would seem we might have freedom over time itself, because time is a physical constraint which won't limit us. But I believe that our freedom in purgatory is limited and relative to our level on the stairway to heaven. At higher levels, we'll experience greater freedom and satisfaction, while at lower levels we'll have limited freedom to choose or control our destiny. In hell, we would have no freedom whatsoever.

While life after death is entirely spiritual, I believe that it will feel much like our current life. While the things I've studied talk about purgatory as being a 'place', I've always felt that place is here in our natural environment, not under the surface or in the sky or somewhere else in space. Maria Simma talks about all of those 'poor souls' who have visited her right there in her own home and some in church, all seeking assistance in their journey to heaven. So, at least some of the time, we may be able to see and experience the natural earthly environment. Other times it might be more like heaven or hell with those kinds of environments.

## YOUR CHOICES NOW HAVE ETERNAL CONSEQUENCES

To summarize, we each have a unique, personal soul that will live on after the death of our body. That life after death is entirely spiritual in nature as compared to our

physical nature in this life. That spiritual world is parallel to our physical world, and we exist in both, but we don't sense it. God and heaven, Satan and hell, with purgatory in between, comprise that spiritual world. Heaven is perfect in all ways; hell is the total opposite with great suffering and despair; purgatory is the whole range between heaven to hell.

We all have essentially unlimited free will to choose our own thoughts, words and actions. Choices have consequences and accountability but the balance between reward and punishment is not complete in this life on earth. The balance comes in life after death with the consequences ranging from heaven to hell. We literally 'choose' our outcome without realizing the consequences. You have to make the choice to know and love God before you can be fully rewarded. God wants to help you, but you have to make that choice; he doesn't force you against your will. If you don't make that choice before death, it may jeopardize your outcome or it may be a part of your journey where you will have to make that choice; the alternative is literally hell.

The next important thing you can do is to choose love; love God and love all others. Love is the key to eternal life in heaven. The more love in your life here and now will shorten your journey to heaven. And growing in love in purgatory may be how you advance on that part of your journey to heaven.

Another key element is that, before you complete your journey to heaven, you will learn a great deal about God and his plans for creation and how this all works. You can learn that now before death or your journey will be delayed in purgatory while you complete that learning process.

Our obvious goal is heaven and eternal life with God, but we have to choose that outcome in order to get there. I don't believe that people actually choose hell, but Satan flips the script, deceiving us by making bad things seem good, desirable, enjoyable, etc. and we choose those bad thoughts, words or deeds for the perceived good that lead us away from God and toward hell.

I don't believe that good people go to hell, but they are still accountable for those bad choices and the balancing between a just reward or punishment is accomplished in purgatory – the stairway between heaven and hell. Life in purgatory ranges from suffering in the lower levels similar to hell, to joy and satisfaction in the upper levels similar to heaven.

While we're alive, we still have some opportunity to change our outcome after death. Our destiny is still in our control in the choices we make and the life that we live from this moment on until our death.

There are some notable examples of last-minute conversions where some people have apparently changed their outcome for the better. But in my own experience, I haven't seen any last-minute changes in people that would affect their outcome. It's most likely that we've each pretty much determined our outcome and will continue on our same path forward with little change. For example, if you've commonly gone to church

on Sundays, you'll likely continue to do so and vice versa. If you don't think going to Church is necessary at all now, you probably won't change your mind.

Another thought is that we are all different and have our own unique pathway to life after death. We each have a unique potential for success but also failure. The outcome depends on how well we each live up to our own potential.

So, are you ready to be judged for your final determination right now? Are you satisfied with the potential outcome? There's still time to choose your consequences.

My love and prayers for you and your loved ones on your journey. Larry Southwick

## PRAYERS

TO GOD, OUR FATHER

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. Amen.

TO GOD, THE SON

O my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell, and lead all souls to heaven, especially those in most need of thy mercy.

TO GOD, THE HOLY SPIRIT

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your spirit and they shall be created, and you will renew the face of the earth.

GLORY BE

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

TO OUR HOLY MOTHER, MARY

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE POOR SOULS IN PURGATORY

The traditional Catholic prayer for the Poor Souls is:
Eternal rest grant unto them O Lord and let your perpetual light shine upon them. May their souls and all of the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.

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Lawrence (Larry) Southwick, 1941- , was born and raised in Leavenworth, WA, baptized Catholic at age 8, attended public schools along with Catholic Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) education, and attended Seattle University (Jesuit) graduating in 1964 with a degree in Civil Engineering. His career included US Forest Service, private engineering consulting, the City of Bellevue (WA) public works 1975-2000, and concluded as a private consultant and FEMA Mitigation Engineer.

Larry has actively practiced his Catholic faith throughout his life, as an altar server, as a lector beginning at Seattle University, as an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion in 1973, and as a sacristan until 2019. He began writing essays about his faith in 1995 and published his first book, A Window Into My Soul in 2016, a collection of 100 essays.

Larry married Karen in 1962. They have three children and six grandchildren with their extended families.